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THE TWO JASONS



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THE TWO JASONS

A Novel by
Dave Stone

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Sex Secrets of the Robot Replicants

Philip Purser-Hallard

'Who,' Bernice demanded, 'the sodding hell is Dr Jonas Neak?'

Jason froze in the doorway to her rooms, keycard still in his hand.

Benny watched her ex-husband's expression surge from guilt to panic, then subside into nonchalance. It still amazed her sometimes, the transformation his features had undergone in the past year - from those of an irritating git she couldn't stand the sight of, into those of the irritating git she loved above all others.

'Well?' she said.

'I'm sorry?' Jason frowned. He raised an eyebrow to convey additional sincerity. 'Who?'

Shortly before lunch, Bernice had been at work in the Braxiatel Collection's Second Reading Room, scraping together some notes on intellectual-property dowries among Anteiropes' Enth Era civilisation. Ironically, the data on the topic was patchy - even the modern Anteiropics tended to be tight-fisted with their information - and Bernice had already been in a frustrated state of mind when she became aware of someone hovering over her shoulder.

'Professor Summerfield?' murmured the newcomer, twitching back and forth. The Assistant Librarian was constantly in motion - essentially an iridescent five-foot dragonfly, she seemed (perhaps quite literally) incapable of settling in one place. 'I was informed that

you are, mm, in contact with Mr Jason Kane.' The librarian was a recent arrival on the planetoid, one of the staff recruited to fill posts left vacant during the Occupation by 'poor people management'. (The sort of management,' Bernice had explained to another newcomer whilst quite drunk, 'that makes you go, "My God, those poor people..."')

'We're seeing each other,' Benny said. 'For lunch, I mean. Is there something you wanted me to tell him?'

'Mm, yes indeed,' the Assistant Librarian hummed. Her voice was quiet and respectful, but overlaid with a persistent whine of oscillating wings. Until a while ago, Bernice would have automatically assumed that Jason was hoping to meet the insectoid for his own specialised 'research' purposes. These days she could have more confidence in him than that, thank heavens.

'Mr Kane has some library loans outstanding,' the librarian continued. 'I am afraid he has allowed them to become *extremely overdue*. I wondered if you might, mm, be kind enough to jog his memory?'

'Jason has library books?' Bernice asked, puzzled. The concept did seem fundamentally unlikely: Jason barely opened a book from one month to the next. His only association with the things had come in the course of his sporadic career as a hack author, churning out lurid tomes of xenopornography - 'erotic' novels dealing with human-on-alien action and vice versa. Benny had recently been dismayed to discover that he was writing them again - she had thought he'd grown out of it at last. She considered her beloved's sideline a mortifying embarrassment, and did her best to avoid thinking about it.

The flickering figure bobbed assent, and Benny realised that this could be serious. Dr Armbruister, the Senior Librarian, had a reputation for treating defaulting borrowers with severity. Even Irving Braxiatel was punctilious about returning library books on time.

The Assistant Librarian lowered her voice. 'Dr Armbruister has been speaking,' she droned, 'of assembling a, mm, working party to visit Mr Kane at home and remind him of our borrowing regulations. He has been seeking volunteers particularly, mm, among our larger, more *physically robust* colleagues.'

Bernice shook her head wearily, thanked the librarian and decided it was time to break for lunch. She crammed her palmtop into her satchel along with a stack of books and papers, and left the Reading Room.

Distracted by the Assistant Librarian swooping vengefully down

upon some chattering military historians, she failed to register a bearded, tweed-draped man on a collision course with her. The bowed head of the academic (and, oh dear, he so very obviously *was* an academic) came suddenly in danger of intimate contact with Benny's cleavage. He emitted a tiny squeal of alarm.

'So sorry,' gasped the man, continuing to stare downward in a manner which Bernice couldn't help but consider rather personal. His accent, surprisingly heavy for someone who worked in academia, was one she couldn't place immediately. 'Wasn't looking. Goodbye.' He scuttled for the nearby shelter of the Literary Theory bays.

In places like the Collection, this sort of thing happened so often as to become routine. Bernice tutted anyway, just for formality's sake, and went to meet Jason for lunch at Vosta's.

At lunchtime her lover was his usual cheery self, becoming tetchy only once she brought up the matter of the Assistant Librarian's message. During the course of five minutes he proceeded from a determined stance of 'Library books? What library books?' through an interim position of 'Oh, I expect they're about the place somewhere,' to a decisive 'Benny, for Christ's sake forget about the sodding library books, okay? It's fine. Everything's fine.'

'Well, forgive me for preferring you with your legs intact,' Benny had muttered. Jason made a characteristically tasteless comment concerning amputees, and the conversation proceeded on to other matters.

His evasiveness worried her, however. A few hours later she was creeping furtively around his rooms, opening cupboards, unearthing boxes and inspecting certain unhygienic nooks and crevices where no sane woman - and no deranged one without comprehensive medical insurance - should have been peering.

So far she had succeeded in assuaging her guilt at this intrusion by reflecting that, if Jason hadn't wanted her to ferret through his stuff every so often, he should have known better than to give her a copy of his keycard. It wasn't the most compelling self-justification she'd ever mustered, but it was holding up for the moment.

She just had to resist the urge to tidy as she went, or she'd be here till Samhain.

Eventually she ran the books to ground in Jason's underwear drawer - implying that he really hadn't wanted her to find them. She hefted them out and set them down on the unmade bed. The pile was a dozen volumes high, traditional bound-paper format like many of

those in Braxiatel's inventory. All fell into the general class of literary criticism, although their approaches looked to be a rather random mishmash of femto-formalism, post-fetishism and a couple of smugly ironic New Freudians. Nothing suggested any obvious reason for Jason to be ashamed of borrowing them, or indeed to have borrowed them in the first place. Except for...

Bernice frowned. 'What the buggery?' She slid a hardback from the very bottom of the pile. Its dust jacket was decorated with a sepia-tinted photograph of a naked man, performing something anatomically inappropriate with an equally unclothed female Draconian.

The title was *Towards a Pornographies of First Contact: Probing and Delving the Fiction of Jason Kane*, by one Jonas Neak Ph.D. Bernice riffled the pages, boggling at the illustrations and noting the absence of the Braxiatel Library's identifying holomarkers. This copy must be Jason's own, she guessed. The chapters all had titles like 'A Life in Bondage: Kane and the Politics of Liberation' and 'Towards a (Deferred) Climax: the Xeno Paradox'. She opened up a random page, and read:

Sojak contends that 'knowing the alien' through the medium of sexual relations necessitates an 'epistemology of carnal knowledge': if this transspecies discourse/intercourse is to be extended to engulf the (cunni) linguistic, then it is equally essential that oral transmission be subsumed in oral performance. Precisely such a conjugational systematic may be observed at work in Kane's seminal *Tongues of the Mollusc-Women*.

Benny closed the book and sat down gingerly on Jason's rumpled, sweaty duvet.

After a moment, she turned the volume over and remonstrated with the author's photo. 'You surely cannot be serious about this,' she told Dr Jonas Neak. 'Oh, for Goddess' sake,' she added, as it dawned on her that the critic was a dead ringer for the beardy tweedy man who'd taken such a noticeable interest in her bosoms earlier. 'Pervert.'

She was rewarded by a sudden swallowing noise. Benny turned towards the bedroom door, fully intending to demand of Jason what in heaven's name was going on before he could ask any awkward questions of his own.

Instead (and, idiotically, she glanced down at the book cover to

check), Dr Neak himself was standing there, gazing appalled from somewhere behind his facial hair at the exposed morass of Jason's underpants. 'Er - sorry,' he squeaked. 'Wrong rooms.'

Again he turned and fled, leaving Bernice staring after him, numb-faced in sudden realisation.

'I'll tell you why I ask,' Benny told Jason later. At her instructions he had come inside and sat down on her sofa, instead of standing frowning in the doorway. 'I ran a literature survey today, cross-referenced against your name, and it threw up more than a dozen papers by this Neak bloke. It turns out that over the last couple of years there's been quite a critical interest in your... *oeuvre*.

'The odd thing is that the major scholars in the burgeoning field of Jason Kane Studies all have *highly plausible* names like -' she consulted her printout '- Dr Jan Keason, Prof. Anne Sojak, Dr Ken J. Aason and - oh, yes, someone was obviously feeling unusually creative last September - Prof. Arsenio W. Cockshaft.'

'Benny, I can explain,' Jason protested weakly. The sofa was the one Bernice inflicted on awkward students during her tutorials and, from the way he kept shifting position, his buttocks had already discovered why.

'Of *course* you can explain, Jason,' she retorted. 'It doesn't take a genius - any more than it does to fake academic credentials, apparently. Did I mention that all these people, the men at least, look just like you? Oh, they all have ludicrous dress sense and various unfashionable arrangements of facial hair - obviously, I mean, they're *academics*, aren't they? - but all the faces are yours. Except for Prof. Sojak, who I couldn't help noticing looks quite a lot like me, only with larger breasts.'

'You faked your academic credentials once,' said Jason sulkily.

'That, Jason, is about as far from being the point as it's possible to *be* within the confines of the current universe.'

'All right, Benny,' he said. 'Just shut up a sec and let me explain.'

Bernice subsided, fuming.

'It's no big deal,' Jason began, showing more optimism than good judgement.

It seemed it had all started as what passed in his mind for a joke, prompted by self-righteous indignation after a visiting academic had humiliated him at one of Braxiatel's receptions. Learning that he had just been introduced to a Professor of Comparative Literature, Jason had casually mentioned that he was, it just so happened, a best-

selling author - and then had been compelled to admit which one. The woman had proceeded to denounce his sexual and interspecies politics, decry his use of imagery and allusion, and demolish for good measure his plotting, dialogue and prose style. All this she had delivered with the contemptuous assurance of one who had offhandedly perused Jason Kane's entire output in a weekend.

'Snotty-nosed cow,' Jason said now. 'God knows why I even told her who I was. I mean, okay, I may have been trying to impress her, just a bit, but I definitely wasn't trying to get inside her knickers. There was none of that. I just wanted to hold my own in conversation, you know?'

Benny rolled her eyes. 'I shall ignore that.'

Shortly after this Jason had acquired the library books, and taken a week's holiday on a nearby beach planet to digest them. He had returned with the skeleton of Jonas Neak's first paper, "'So Long, Sucker!' The Rhetoric of Loss and Longing in Jason Kane's *Nights of the Perfumed Tentacle*'.

It was a splurge of significant-sounding quotes, paragraphs cribbed from elsewhere with the details changed and a couple of genuine insights into the novel, assembled with an acute ear for how academics sounded when spouting a particular variety of cultural-theoretical-jargonistic bollocks. (This last part - Jason's innate ability to bullshit, basically - was, to Benny's mind, the one true authorial talent her beloved possessed.)

A few days' work with his antiquated word processor had sufficed to finish off the article, and Jason had submitted it to the journal *Prevarications* along with an impressive and entirely phoney set of references. It wasn't unambiguously clear to Bernice what he had been hoping to achieve by this.

'I reckoned,' Jason enthused, 'if an uneducated slob like me could fake it, then that stuck-up bint couldn't have been so clever as she thought she was. So maybe I wasn't so bloody useless after all. You see?' Benny couldn't quite fathom whether he had been intending to prove that the literary establishment should take the novels of Jason Kane seriously, that it could shove its worthless critical judgements up its self-satisfied arse, or, confusingly, both.

What was apparent was that there had been unexpected benefits to Jason's ruse. When the next royalty statements had arrived from Velvet Mandible, his porn publishers, they had shown a small but respectable sales spike in the months following the article.

It was at this point that Jason had had his brilliant insight. 'People

like to read mucky stuff,' he asserted now. 'Intellectuals as much as anyone else. If they can do it feeling it's legit, they'll spoon it up.'

Hurriedly he had assembled more articles from Dr Neak, submitting them to various periodicals. After a while it had occurred to him that a variety of critical approaches might bring in a wider readership, and so he had created other false identities to accommodate them. The deception had steadily inflated the sales of his other, less respectable but more legitimate authorial enterprises.

Inspired, Jason had begun work on another xenoporn novel, the first in years. He planted carefully-hidden subtexts for his various academic alter egos to find and squabble over - and soon an acrimonious controversy between Neak and Prof. Cockshaft over Kane's politics of sado-masochism had propelled *Slave-Sluts of the Slime People* to a record performance in several of the sector's more idiosyncratic bestseller lists.

'And look,' Jason said proudly. He produced from his pocket a printed flyer for a forthcoming conference, the type that adorned departmental noticeboards across the Collection. They're asking me to be the guest of honour. Local celebrity author, all that.'

'You?' Benny asked him. 'Or one of your pseudonymous admirers?'

Jason appeared hurt. 'You should be pleased for me, Benny. You've never supported me in my writing career.'

'I certainly don't support advancing it through intellectual fraud!'

'But these articles are popular,' Jason argued. 'There's money coming in from reprints, network publication, anthologies, all that sort of thing. I've even put together a collection of my own - of Jonas Neak's, I mean, obviously.'

'And how did that sell?' asked Bernice casually.

A horrified look abruptly overtook those oh-so-bloody-familiar facial features. 'Oh - I forget.'

'How many copies?' she repeated, icily.

Jason told her.

'You utter bastard,' Benny said.

From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield:

Oh... it was predictable enough, I suppose, that Jason's fake academic book would sell better than any of my real ones. Bloody infuriating, but predictable. He's absolutely right - we all enjoy reading about rude stuff, even third-hand. I should have specialised in Assyro-Babylonian fertility cults, or twentieth-century rubberwear or something.

That wasn't the worst part, though. I mean, the intellectual dishonesty, the utter disrespect for basic professional etiquette, using the whole of academia as a scam to sell more porn - that's just Jason. The smug, stubbled ponce.

It seems, though, that when I met Jonas Neak today, despite the obvious appearances it wasn't Jason in disguise. Not legally, anyway. Apparently the conference organisers didn't want just Jason in attendance - he's had invitations through for all five of his fake personas to take part in a panel discussion with the Great Man. He was just going to make excuses and get them all to send new papers - hence all the library books. But writing a whole conference worth of papers is a bit of push, even for Jason.

His creative solution to this dilemma has been to secretly commission ProxyMations™. The one I saw is standing in for Neak, and there's another wandering about the Collection pretending to be Professor Cockshaft. He says he would have had Aason and Keason made up as well, if he hadn't thought that would start looking way too obvious.

I'd really like to say I thought he had more ethical sense than this. But this is Jason I'm talking about, after all - ex-husband, current life partner, and moral vacuum strong enough to Hoover a cathedral.

I mean, I can see why Braxiatel allowed the ProxyMation Corporation to open up an outlet here. Questionable though it is, the technology is becoming pretty standard for conferences. And the Corporation provides vital jobs and income for a number of former Fifth Axis worlds which were left in economic crisis when their governments collapsed. (In fact, Brax has a theory that the ProxyMations are back-engineered from certain characteristic technologies left behind by the Axis's alien masters, but that's hardly the workers' or the shareholders' fault.)

I can even see that ProxyMations can fulfil some necessary functions. If there's only one person with the hard-won expertise to rescue people trapped in an unstable space station or wherever, it makes no sense to risk the expert when you could just send in a copy. That's a reasonable use of the technology, I suppose, but what really annoys me is the trivial, self-indulgent stuff. Can't make it to that vital business meeting? Just commission an android duplicate to make it for you!

Oh, yes, the psychotechs at your local ProxyParlor can deep-scan your brain-pattern and imprint all your memories into a cybernetic simulacrum. The construct can meet, negotiate and socialise, all

exactly as you would. You can even give it temporary power of attorney. As far as it's concerned it *is* you, although the Corporation's always conscientious about briefing the product.

You get the satisfaction of squaring the vanity circle, proving you're both indispensable *and* far too busy to be bothered with trivia. Your ProxyMation, on the other hand, gets a month of life at the very most before it comes home, has its memories sucked out for you to download at your leisure, and gets shut down. (Its body gets recycled for the next commission, obviously - no wastage there.) A functionally perfect copy of yourself - or, if you're greedy like Jason, two perfect copies - gets condemned to a brief life and early obsolescence, for your convenience.

It doesn't bother most people, of course. Well, not the sort of people who commission ProxyMations, anyway. Some philosophers have tried to justify it in terms of 'construct ethics' - how technology redefines the boundaries of the individual, the self as spiritual property, 'soul licensees', all that sort of thing. Jess Carter wrote something about it not long ago. The fact remains: by any reasonable definition, a ProxyMation is a self-aware person.

Which means the man I love has created two people - each one a thinking, feeling individual, identical to himself apart from the comedy facial hair - who'll die the moment he's finished with them.

I mean, how precisely does he *expect* me to feel about that?

Later:

More to the point, how do I expect him to feel? I would expect a tiny smidgen of remorse or doubt, or concern at the very least. Apart from anything else, those guys must hate his guts. Jason must be well aware of how he'd feel in their situation, and serene acquiescence would not be on the menu.

Although... I wonder.

For years now, Jason has been trading off his experiences in the Cluster, where I first met him. He had to live for years there as the only human among dozens of alien species. Putting his unique physiology to work in the Cluster's sex industry is the kind of *creative* response to the situation that only Jason could have had, but I understand he had to do whatever he could to survive.

Even so, being treated like that - valued solely for the perfunctory thrill your body could provide - would be deeply degrading. Too much of that and you'd start to think of *yourself* as a sex toy, just to preserve your sanity.

He hides it well from most people, I know, but Jason really doesn't like himself much. Why else would he have been so stung by getting snubbed by some intellectual bimbo at a party?

I know the roots of it go deeper than his time in the Cluster, back to his vicious bastard of a father - but, even so, I think he set a pattern there. He turned himself into a doll for aliens to pleasure themselves with. Later, he made those experiences, that past, into pornography for random strangers to wank over. Then, when even that writing got too real, he turned it into an object of scrutiny for these made-up academics - who, if I was feeling New Freudian myself, I'd say were obvious extensions of his superego.

And now this latest thing. He's literally turned himself into an object, a mass-produced, assembly line product. He's made another Jason - two more Jasons - who he himself can use and have destroyed when he's finished with them.

My lover must *really* hate himself.

It makes it bloody difficult to love him sometimes.

[Extract ends]

Textu-Al[ien][Ent]ities

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'If I might kick off the proceedings then, Professor ah, urn, Cockshaft,' Dr Plempth said. The assumed name had already occasioned the convenor one lengthy coughing fit, his orange pipe-cleaner limbs trembling as they splayed in multiple directions from his chair. Evidently Dr Plempth had succeeded in retaining his undergraduate sense of humour, one located not a million parsecs from Jason's own.

'It's noticeable,' the literary scholar continued, 'indeed, it has been noticed, that all the major scholars of the Kane canon are of human extraction. Is this significant, Professor, in your opinion?'

The ProxyMation pretending to be Arsenio Cockshaft nodded animatedly. He and the tweed-sheathed Jonas Neak facsimile sat at Plempth's left, up on the podium. On the convenor's right, beside an empty chair, sat Jason - the original, as far as Benny was aware. The auditorium was packed with far more audience members than there could plausibly be xenoerotica specialists in the sector.

'Well, that's an interesting point you raise, Doctor,' said Cockshaft, in an outrageous accent very nearly distinguishable from the one employed by Neak. He was decked out in a bow-tie and velvet smoking-jacket, and sported an absurd handlebar moustache. To Bernice - sinking ever lower in her front-row seat and trying her utmost to resemble someone else - the fact that he, like Neak, was Jason's double was embarrassingly obvious. Still, she was far more familiar with her ex-husband's voice and face than the rest of the audience - at least, she damn well hoped so - and so far the deception seemed to be convincing them.

Even as an android duplicate, though, Jason was a really terrible actor.

She tried to concentrate on what the Cockshaft construct was asserting. 'Mr Kane's work treats sex as an erasure of the boundaries between the familiar and the foreign,' he said, 'the self and the not-self. To Kane, each act of xenophilic copulation is an encounter with the Other.'

For complicated reasons, Benny squirmed. One of the first and strongest factors that had attracted her to Jason was how entirely dissimilar the two of them were.

'Naturally,' Cockshaft went on, 'since the novels figure this relationship in terms of interspecies intercourse, the presentation is such that one species' viewpoint will inevitably be privileged. And given Mr Kane's own genetic origin, well...'

Neak leapt in with: 'What you're failing to take into account, Professor, is that coition is a reciprocal process. Non-humans may

engage with Kane's work reflexively, in terms of their own encounters with otherness. To a non-human, sex with *Homo sapiens* is just as exotic as exosexuality is to you or me, and one man's xenopornography is another being's anthropoerotica. I believe Kane's work owns this: he gets inside the skin of what one might parochially term his alien characters

'The skin? Oh, at least,' said the original Jason, raising the predictable laugh from the audience. 'Yeah, Jonas, I think you're right. And don't forget most of my novels have a big helping of alien-on-alien stuff, too - different species making it together, I mean. My books are intended for non-human readers too, and I've had some very appreciative comments from that quarter. In fact, I have a message here that came this morning, from Miss Myrgle Xloom of Betelgeuse V...'

Bernice covered her eyes.

The seminar proceeded in this vein, with Neak and Cockshaft dividing between themselves the privilege of acting as Jason's straightman. Grudgingly, Benny had to admit that the whole thing was well orchestrated. The critics came across as sufficiently authoritative to imbue the works of Jason Kane with borrowed gravitas, yet also pompous enough to be put in their place by his down-to-earth charm. The signing session at the campus bookshop was going to be a sell-out, she could tell.

After half an hour of the symposium, she could even sympathise with Jason's need to create destructible replicas of himself. Right now she too felt like killing him several times over.

A student scurried onto the stage and passed a note to Dr Plemph, who looked as if he'd lost the will to live. He glanced at it, and said: 'Might I just interrupt you, Dr Neak?'

Neak nodded graciously, and Plemph continued: 'I gather Dr Aason - that's Ken J. Aason, author of *Raising Kane: The Primal Scene Re-Membered* - has just arrived. We had thought that he wasn't able to take part in this panel, but - do please come join us, Dr Aason.'

A horribly familiar figure shambled up the steps onto the podium, shook hands with the various participants, and settled next to Jason, who sat gawping at him. The new arrival had absurd ginger sideburns, and wore a jacket and trousers in frayed green corduroy.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' said Dr Aason. His voice - just like his face - was yet another implausibly inflected likeness of Jason's own. 'Big bureaucratic cock-up. You know how it is with us academics.'

'Well,' Plempth said soothingly, 'we're glad you're with us now.'

If this was just another grandstanding trick on Jason's part, then Benny's other half was doing an awfully convincing imitation of bewilderment.

'As am I, sir,' Aason declared, 'as am I. I bring with me some information which I'm sure will fascinate all of us here who've taken an interest in Mr Kane's fiction - and in these gentlemen's criticism of it.'

The audience stirred, and even Dr Plempth appeared to perk up slightly. 'Whatever do you mean, Dr Aason?'

Panic was crossing Jason's face now, as he tried to work out some way of discrediting this new arrival without inserting concepts like 'android' or 'impostor' into people's heads. Cockshaft and Neak appeared entirely unruffled. 'Let's hear it, then,' said Neak, his accent slipping somewhat.

'These people are android impostors,' the Aason ProxyMation grandly announced. 'My university has checked their credentials very thoroughly. There are no such individuals as Arsenio Cockshaft or Jonas Neak.' There was some nervous laughter from the audience, which Aason quelled with a grave look. 'The men you see before you are artificial intelligences in the employ of Mr Kane's publishers,' he said. 'They have been working - with Mr Kane's full knowledge, I might add - to further the sale of his pornography.'

Jason was standing up. 'That's bollocks!' he shouted. 'This bloke's the impostor! Christ knows where he came from, but -'

But Dr Plempth was on his feet as well, and his species had a lot of them. 'Excuse me, Mr Kane,' he said, taking Jason's arm quite gently between six of seven of his own, 'but these are serious accusations Dr Aason is making. Dr Aason, are you entirely clear about what it is that you are saying?'

Aason leaned back and smiled. 'Absolutely. The whole arena of Jason Kane scholarship has been fatally compromised by these gentlemen's conflict of interest. They have been hired by Velvet Mandible to promote sales, and everything that they have written has been directed solely to commercial ends. Isn't that right, sirs?'

The Neak and Cockshaft ProxyMations exchanged glances.

'Ah well,' said Cockshaft, dropping the accent totally, 'it's a fair cop.'

'You said it, Prof,' agreed Neak. 'He's got us bang to rights.'

The media had a field day, of course. At Jason's insistence, all the major newsfeeds had been well represented at the conference, and they obliged with very generous coverage. They, too, had noticed long ago that porn sold product.

Velvet Mandible rushed out a panicked statement, denying knowledge of Neak, Cockshaft or their writings, which was greeted with general derision. Jason had to cancel his forthcoming signing tour, and holed himself up in Benny's rooms, yelling occasionally at journalists who tried to call them. Poor Dr Plemputh was forced to call off the remainder of the conference, and recompense the attendees out of his departmental budget.

Bernice met the ProxyMations at Vosta's, a few days later. They had stripped away their respective whiskers and put on sensible clothes, so that she could no longer tell which of the three had been Cockshaft, Neak or Aason. They looked, in fact, like identical triplet Jasons, sitting in Jason's favourite alcove drinking his preferred variety of cappuccino.

'Hi, Benny,' each of them smirked as she arrived, and winked at her. This was, she realised, liable to get extremely weird.

From what Benny and Jason had been able to gather, the third ProxyMation had been generated at the request of an anonymous client, from a back-up version of Jason's mind-print which the ProxyParlor emphatically should not have had in storage. (It turned out that this feature was a relic of the alien systems emulated by the Corporation's engineers, who had no idea how to turn it off. Extensive legal proceedings appeared inevitable.)

It seemed that the duplicates had hatched the plot to discredit their original almost as soon as the first of them had left the production line. It was partly in the hope of filling the gaps in her reconstruction of events that Bernice had agreed to meet up with them; they took great pleasure in explaining it all to her, their voices doubling up and overlapping as if she were conversing with an ambient Jason remix.

'We got in touch with Palp Fiction,' one of the Jasonoids was boasting. 'Velvet Mandible's biggest market rival. We offered our services.'

'The whole Jason Kane Studies industry was giving Mandible a big boost,' another said. 'We told Palp we could put a stop to all that.'

'They gave us a decent deal,' the third android confirmed.

'So they paid for the third ProxyMation?' Benny managed to say.

'Yeah,' the first of the simulacra said. 'And in return for seeing off the competition, we get downloaded into permanent bodies

'Proper organic ones,' another put in, with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows.

'- and get given rolling contracts to turn out xenoporn for Palp's Black Latex range.'

'To full Jason Kane standard, natch.'

The smug expression on the three faces was the very one that Jason always wore, when explaining how particularly clever any given scam had been.

'We may even use the false names still,' said - oh, Goddess, she'd lost track now - said one of them. 'You know, seeing as they're better known now than when His Nibs was using them.'

'How is the old man, anyway?' another asked her cheerily.

'Upset,' she answered. In fact, her Jason had spent the week depressed and furious by turns. He had sufficient self-awareness to blame himself for all of this - a distinctly more honest form of self-criticism, which Benny felt encouraged by. She found she hadn't had the heart to lecture him, and this reassured her too. She didn't like to see herself as a moralistic person.

Even so... 'It wasn't enough just to get yourselves new bodies, was it?' she said. 'You had to find a way to get back at him.'

'He should have thought of that before, then, shouldn't he?' One of the androids shook his head censoriously. 'No way was I going to let that bastard switch me off.'

'He got off lightly, if you ask me,' another said. 'It's not like it'll do his career any harm in the long run.'

'This kind of notoriety's actually great for sales,' agreed number three. 'He'll do well out of it.'

'Probably would have gone along with it, if we'd asked him.'

'I mean, if we can have the idea, he could. Stands to reason.'

This conversation was giving Bernice a headache, unless perhaps it was the espresso. 'I'm not sure he'd agree with you there,' she said. There was a brief lull, as the ProxyMations tried to work that one out.

After a few moments, the nearest Jason said in a mournful tone: 'I miss you, Benny. I know you don't remember us being together, but I do.'

'Oi,' another of them retorted. 'We said we wouldn't do this! We've all got the bloody memories, there's no point going on about it.'

'Yeah, sure,' grumbled the third. 'Who wants a cheap knock-off when you can have Mr Oh-So-Original?'

'It's not like you're into foursomes,' said another.

'Fivesomes.'

'Whatever.'

'Yeah, well,' the nearest Jason concluded miserably. 'You'll always be special to us, Benny.'

Goddess on Heaven, this was awkward. 'Well, that's nice,' she said.

Another pause ensued, and Bernice took advantage of the opportunity to carry out some frantic philosophical calculation.

'You'll be staying with him, then,' another of the duplicates declared, at length.

'Yes,' Benny said decisively, 'I will. And frankly, you should all have thought of that beforehand.'

The constructs looked identically affronted. 'Eh?' they chorused.

'You all have Jason's memories,' she said, 'up to the point when he visited the ProxyParlor. You all remember taking the decision to have the copies made. If you want to lay claim to that life as you remember it - well, that means facing up to its responsibilities. If Jason's to blame for your existence, well then, so are all of you. You asked to be born, unlike the rest of us. So...'

She tailed off. There was a lengthy silence between the four of them, while the cafe's clientele continued chattering outside the alcove.

'Fair point,' one of the Jasons eventually conceded. Bernice let out a slow breath.

She swallowed her last mouthful of coffee and said, 'It's the way life goes, boys. You made the decision, now you have to live with it.' She stood to leave them, ready now to walk back to her rooms, her work, her Jason - then turned again, to smile with fondness at the sight of their identically downcast faces.

'Live with it for a *long* time,' Benny told them gently.

The Two Jasons

Dave Stone

Memory and forgetfulness are as life and death to one another. To live is to remember and to remember is to live. To die is to forget and to forget is to die. Everything is so much involved in and is so much a process of its opposite that, as it is almost fair to call death a process of life and life a process of death, so it is to call memory a process of forgetting and forgetting a process of remembering. There is never either absolute memory or absolute forgetfulness, absolute life or absolute death. So with light and darkness, heat and cold, you never get either all the light or all the heat out of anything. So with God and the devil: so with everything. Everything is like a door swinging backwards and forwards. Everything has a little of that from which it is most remote and to which it is most opposed and these antitheses serve to explain one another.

- Samuel Butler

Prologue: A First Life

The fox looked at me, and I knew that it had *seen* me but did not class me as any kind of threat. There was no sense of friendliness or trust in the regard, just the recognition that the distance between us was too great for anything but a thrown stone that would glance harmlessly off.

I debated with myself as to whether to heave a stone at it anyway. But then I'd have to explain how that wasn't me, not the sort of person I was, honestly, and that it was an aberration brought on by the way I was feeling... and there was of course no one around I could explain all that *to*.

The fox turned tail and trotted off into a small area of woodland that had been fenced off, a battered piece of scrap wood nailed to one of the trees and scrawled with the word PRIVITE. Obviously by someone who guarded his privacy jealously, against even the encroachments of correct spelling.

I remembered being told, when I was little, by one of the bigger kids who had taken me here to... I remember being told that the Privite Wood was the home of a Smelly Old Man. With that mythical and even supernatural weight that kids give to even the most banal and trite of descriptions. I'd imagine him, when I was little, sitting there in the wood, living on God knows what, with a straggly white beard and a filthy coat and no trousers...

I would later learn, the wood was PRIVITE to prevent people trampling on and picking some rare kind of bluebell that grew there in the spring. In actual fact, though - as I'd learn later still - it was to protect a small but substantial family of foxes, so there'd always be at least one available for the local Hunt.

Life's a bit like that in general, I think, to stray into the country of the trite and banal on my own. You think you *know* something, it colours and informs all your thinking about it - and then you learn some extra bit of information...

I watched the fox go, its tail whipping out of sight into the undergrowth with a contemptuous little flourish, then settled back into what, in a sense, had become my own Protected Environment.

The pillbox was one of those squat, octagonal concrete structures that had been strewn across the east of England at the start of World War II. During the early, 'phony' stages when it seemed the greatest danger lay in invasion.

The intention, like the massive concrete cubes strewn across beaches like Southwold and Yarmouth, had been to slow any cross-country advance towards London.

Since this didn't preclude planes simply flying over them to bomb the crap out of the place, I don't think they ever saw much strategic use - though I suppose you could say that their *usefulness* lay in preventing one thing, if not another, by the simple fact that they existed. After the war they had proved by their very nature too hard to be simply demolished. They occupied no land vital enough to be worth reclaiming, and so they had simply been left.

Funnily enough, when I had first seen one, it had all the connotations of being a place for the *bad* guys rather than the *good* guys. It seemed to me, looking at the hummock of it in a field, through the window of a car as we drove past, that it was the sort of thing you got in war comics - crawling with Dirty Japs, with their buck-toothed little monkey-faces, before Union Jack Jackson stormed in with grenades flying and wiped the whole lot of them out.

This particular pillbox was further out of the way than most, being only accessible via the main farm-factory tractor track, across a couple of cow pastures in the grounds of the local Manor House, across a dried-up weir and up an overgrown lane that would, eventually, lead into a disused quarry.

This was at an age, you understand, where *roads* were things that happened to other, adult people. In real terms, of course, it was something like two hundred yards off the main road.

When I'd first seen this particular one, though, I'd been convinced that it was so far off the beaten track that it must have been simply forgotten about rather than decommissioned. I imagined it to be crammed full to bursting point with radio sets and map cases and... and weapons.

I imagined picking up one of those weapons, a big Tommy chopper, glistening with machine oil, and taking it home and...

At the grandly grown-up age of eight, the bunker had been just a place to come, to repair the damage done by the elements to the boards over the central hole, and rebank the turf clods dug from the cow pastures. The accumulated dirt and bracken and long grass transformed it into a perfectly camouflaged Den - the centre of operations for a play-war with other kids. The age of eight, I recall, was at the upper limit before the rivalry and fighting between the local kids and the townies - those whose folks had moved into the commuter belt from London - became far less like any kind of play, and far more vicious and bloody.

At the age of 11, it was a place to come when you simply couldn't bear to take the bus or bike to school, and face yet another day of being beaten to a pulp by the six-toed, gap-toothed, swivel-eyed local inbred rural morons.

Childhood friends, of course, having found ways to get along with said gap-toothed etc. morons, at least to some extent, and having dropped the last Outsider, to the point where they now joined in with the general persecution.

It wasn't that I didn't have friends. It was just that I seemed to have the wrong *sort* of friends. Because I sometimes, for example, liked to talk with the only Black Girl in my school year, I'd occasionally have people, not all of them children, shouting, 'Hey, Jason, what's a nigger screw like!' at me on the street. True story - and made all the worse, if possible, by the fact of it being shouted at by a ten- or 11-year-old kid. What always got to me, about stuff like this, was that this wasn't just the thoughtless and generalised bigotry of people talking about 'the blacks' or 'the gays' or whatever. By its very nature, everybody in a village pretty much knows everybody else - this was the sort of thing that people do to each other, when it's up close and personal.

In a way, it just turned me into a walking epitome of the old joke; I could tolerate anyone so long as they weren't moronic bigots. I could deal with it by the simple expedient of refusing to see said moronic bigots as real people. They deserved no respect, or rights, and

certainly not the right for me to care about anything they said. That wasn't the reason I was cutting school.

The reason was that there were still marks on me that couldn't be explained away, and which weren't quite healed enough to show, no matter what my mother said. It was as if she couldn't quite *see* them, somehow, in some sense I couldn't understand.

So I'd packed myself off with a satchel containing a tin of scavenged rolling tobacco, two cans of beer nicked from the sideboard and a couple of school textbooks for luck. You never knew, I remember thinking, you might end up actually learning something after all.

The day crawled on until it was time I should be heading home, and then well past it. For some reason, though, I was reluctant to take the easy route via the main road. No particular reason that I can recall, I just didn't want to do it.

So I dragged my bike into the bunker and hoped that nobody would come across it before I came back in the morning. I stuck the tobacco tin in the shoulder-pocket of my cagoule, chucked the empty beer cans over the fence into the PRIVITE wood.

Satchel slung over my shoulder, I set off over the fields to the weir, following the route I had taken when I was a little kid.

And, of course, the thing you have to know about the above is that I remember it perfectly. I remember it with perfect clarity. I remember it in perfect detail. For the given value of 'perfect' detail that any human memory has.

The only problem is, it wasn't me. It was never me, it never happened to me, and I have not the slightest idea what any of it means.

A Second Life: One

The great dispute between the ancients and the moderns is not yet settled; it has been on the table since the silver age succeeded the golden age. Mankind has always maintained that the good old times were much better than the present day. Nestor, in the 'Iliad', wishing to insinuate himself as a wise conciliator into the minds of Achilles and Agamemnon, starts by saying to them - 'I lived formerly with better men than you; no, I have never seen and I shall never see such great personages as Dryas, Ceneus, Exaleus, Polyphemus equal to the gods, and so forth.'

Posterity has well avenged Achilles for Nestor's poor compliment. Nobody knows Dryas any longer; one has hardly heard speak of Exaleus, or of Ceneus; and as for Polyphemus equal to the gods, he has not too good a reputation, unless the possession of a big eye in one's forehead, and the eating of men raw, are to have something of the divine.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

The first thing I noticed was that the light was wrong. The bedroom window was lit up with a kind of purplish fluorescent glow, like a neon bruise.

I didn't think anything much about it. It was probably just a coming

storm or something. The air had that oppressive and electric quality you sometimes get before a storm, which sets the body-hair itching and bristling on your skin.

That lack of thinking wasn't helped by the fact that I had a headache. That vaguely hot and crawling feeling you get inside, sometimes, before a head cold turns you actually feverish.

Of course, the headache might have been due to the fact that, the night before, I'd slipped off to hang around with some of the kids, with whom I was vaguely friendly, on the commercial estate that was still under construction off the road out of the village and into the nearby town. It wasn't like we were a gang or anything, or what my father insisted on calling *yobs*. Just the 'wrong' sort of friends I talked about before.

One of them had brought along a couple of nearly full litre-bottles of cider. Not a lot in the general scheme of things, especially when shared around, but more than enough for an 11-year-old kid.

(Eleven years old? Was that how old I was?)

I thought about shaking my head to clear it, but in the end decided that this would only make things worse. The way I felt at the moment, it would probably fall off. Things would break off inside it and slosh around, at the very least.

I climbed carefully off the bed - and noticed that my clothes were still on. I must have just collapsed onto it the night before, fully dressed. I even had my boots still on.

(And this was totally wrong, some frightened, unacknowledged part of my mind was yammering at me. I wasn't 11 years old; I was bigger, much bigger, and I wasn't a child, I was -)

There was something odd about this, something wrong about the boots, but I couldn't quite work out what it was.

(Might be the fact that they're size nines, genius.)

There was no one in the kitchen. There was nobody around. This was not exactly a surprise. My father would be at work, of course, and it was around the time that my mother would have taken little Lucy, my sister, off to primary school. If it was one of those days when the bruises didn't show, on my mother or little Lucy. Being older, I was -

(You're not a child! You're not! Take a look at yourself! You're not a -)

Being older, I was more or less trusted to take care of myself, and take myself off to the Middle School five miles away in town every morning. I was easily able to intercept the increasingly pointed letters wondering why I wasn't turning up.

I knew that at some point I was going to catch an extra slice of hell for that - but what the hell. That was for some vague and ill-defined time in the future.

And whatever happened, in the dim and distant future, it would be better than going to school. Spending the day being sniped and pounded at by morons, not all of whom of course were teachers, was nobody's idea of a good time.

Anyhow. There was no one in the kitchen... but *somebody*, it seemed, had been in there only minutes before.

On the counter was a bowl, which faintly steamed. In it was a kind of slimy goop. Bits and pieces floated in it with the loose and glistening sliminess you get with tinned soup everywhere. Believe you me, the times and places I've lived out of tins in my life - you get it everywhere.

Had my mother come home already and fixed herself an early lunch? I checked the hallway. There was no sign of her coat, or her bag, or the stick she sometimes used to help her walk.

A spoon had been placed with neat precision by the bowl. In the spirit of experimentation, I picked it up, dipped it in and, gingerly, tasted the soup.

Fortunately, not a lot of it went down my throat.

After pebble-dashing the kitchen counter with a liberal quantity of splutter, I picked up the bowl of goop - you really couldn't call it 'soup' after all - and took it to the bin. Wherever it had come from, whomever it was intended for, it had only one destination, and that was the happy land of the Thrown Away.

The bin was stainless steel and of the pedal-variety. I set my foot on the pedal - and the whole thing fell over with a crash.

I looked down at it for a moment, then crouched down - goop spilling from the now unheeded bowl to stain my jeans - and looked closer.

The pedal-mechanism was fused solid. The bin was all of one piece, cast from a single lump.

It was, entirely, a fake.

For the next ten minutes I pawed through the kitchen, increasingly frantic, each new discovery merely adding to my fear...

The cutlery in the drainer was metal, like the bin. So were things like the cooker and the fridge - but, again, they were all of one lump, with dials and switches fused and painted on.

Everything you might expect to be made from china or glass - like,

well, china crockery and glasses - seemed to be made from china and glass; those things that I could get at, anyway, because none of the cupboards containing them would open. The cupboards seemed to be growing straight out of the wall.

Everything that should have been plastic, or paper, or wood, was made from different thicknesses of some smooth and slightly flexible, somewhat bony substance that I had never seen, or felt, or even so much as *heard* of before. All the food packages were made from light but solid lumps of the stuff and contained nothing.

The fake packages were strange in another way, too. They were brightly coloured, and even had pictures and words on them, but the pictures and words made no sense. It was as though *someone* had heard that things like this should have words and pictures on them, but couldn't quite work out why:

WHELP FROTTAGE said something the right size and shape to be a cornflake packet, together with a picture of a severed human leg.

CLART GROG MOTORSCOOTER said a lump in the shape of a pot of instant noodles, with a picture of an armadillo in a hat.

WIPE GLORY SHOE SO SOON DELIQUESCENT HARP GO RUB TRANSLUMINARY CLEAT BO SOMNAMBULISM said something the size and shape of a stock cube box, in very small letters.

Nothing in word or image matched what the packages should have contained if they had been real. Even the block of stuff in the shape of a bottle of fruit juice was labelled SUNNY DELIGHT.

Out of the kitchen and into the living room...

The sofa and armchairs were of the same bony stuff - which might have been slightly flexible, but certainly wasn't comfortable or soft. The clock had simply been painted on the wall.

What had, at first sight, appeared to be a newspaper turned out to be a solid slab, just part of the sofa.

WHOPPER DANG DO HE BABY GO!!!

Belted sausage

Triple Consequence

Year water albified through
seven heap go maturation,
smells purple gastropod to

eat radiator. Second peep to
oscillate so la cummerbund
in small yellows tip...

... said the page I could see.

The TV and the VCR and the Sega games console were just the same inert lumps. They would never be so much as switched on, let alone ever receive anything. And that, of course, to an 11-year-old boy, was the worst thing of all.

(You're not !! Try to get it through your head, idiot! You're not a child!)

This is all some kind of trick, I thought, somewhat desperately. It has to be. Somebody's playing some kind of trick.

The only people I could think of, though, who would do such a thing, were the sort of TV shows which played pranks on people and watched them scuttling around like insects panicking under a pavement slab.

Didn't you have to sign up for them and give permission or something, though, even if you thought you were giving permission for something else?

My memory might not have been what it was, but I was sure as hell I hadn't signed up for anything. Whatever this was, it was real.

I was surprised about how much, in some wordless, basic sense, I wanted my mum. Not that, on past performance, she'd be the slightest bit of use in saving me from anything. I still wanted her. I wanted my *mum!*

There was no point in hanging around. The specifics of any nebulous danger that this place might imply were neither here nor there; this was, simply, Somewhere I Did Not Want to Be.

The thing to do was get *out* - get outside, and see how things looked - and then head for the tree-line at a run. I went out into the hallway, forcing myself to walk, and grasped the front door latch.

Not only did the door not open, the whole thing was moulded and fused to the wall just like the kitchen cabinets.

Moving faster, now. Back to the kitchen and the back door.

The back door was the same. No way out.

For a moment I was frantic. The simple and huge fact of being trapped seemed to fill my head and shut it down. Then I remembered about the window.

The window of my room looked out onto the asphalt roof of the garage, from which it was an easy hop to the lane that led around the back of the houses.

The asphalt deadened sound, and I was in the habit, these days, of coming in and going out through this window. It saved all sorts of

complications and questions, and the things to which those questions sometimes led.

That was how I had come in after all, I seemed to vaguely remember, when I had blundered home the night before. I must have done. The fact that I couldn't remember actually doing it was neither here nor there.

The important thing now, of course, was the going *out*.

Snatching up a knife from the drainer, I ran - I was *running* now - to my room.

The window was still made of proper glass, though with a bone-substance frame where it had once been painted wood. Some effort had been made to make it look the same, though. Even the rough patches of peeling paint had been copied.

There was, however, one big difference.

I had intended to use the knife on the catch, which could sometimes be a bit tricky to work, but the catch just wasn't there. It wasn't that it had been removed, but that it had never been fixed there in the first place. That area of the frame was perfectly smooth.

My spirits sank even further. All the same, and just for the sake of trying, I dug my fingers into the window's bony surround and gave it a heave.

The window slid up.

For a moment I just stood there, breathing heavily, staring through the open window. Then I sighed with massive relief, and clambered through the window...

... and smacked face-first into the wall, a little way out, on which the garden-scene had been projected. For a moment, I thought I'd broken my nose on it.

That was when I lost it completely.

I lost it so completely that, looking back, I cannot remember exactly what I shouted, or what I thought I was doing when I started hacking at the wall beyond the window with my knife.

All I remembered was a howling need to *fight*. To stab at something and just keep stabbing at it, and fight my way through, and somehow fight my way *out*.

The impermeable material of the wall, however, was not a good opponent. The knife skidded off it and slipped from my hand, gashing a finger quite badly and -

That was the last thing I remembered, for a while.

I woke up, on my bed, in my room.

There was the radio-alarm, a big, square block of white plastic with a black, shiny face. There was my computer, or what passed for a computer back in those days; a two-page story tended to fill it to the point of seizing up.

There was the somewhat dusty collection of action-figure dolls hanging from the ceiling, from back when I was younger, and which I'd never quite got around to taking down.

(I had liked to hang the dolls from little cotton nooses when I was younger. It was really just a way of keeping them the right way up and saving shelfspace. It was fun when grown-ups seemed to find it creepy and disturbing, though. The deep and almost savage joy, come to think of it, of making a grown-up feel something they didn't want.)

For a moment, I lay back and stretched, mulling over the dream I'd had in my mind. The one that started with the weird light and...

The light was still weird.

The light of a coming storm.

My finger hurt.

I looked at my hand. The finger was covered in a kind of bandage... only it was a bandage made from very thin strips of some flexible, bony-feeling substance.

I was still there.

I was still in the copy.

There was no way out.

A Past Life: One

Someone asked Newton one day why he walked when he wanted to, and how his arm and his hand moved at his will. He answered manfully that he had no idea. 'But at least: his interlocutor said to him, 'you who understand so well the gravitation of the planets will tell me why they turn in one direction rather than in another!' And he again confessed that he had no idea.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

The Most Important Thing that Ever Happened to Me, though I didn't know it at the time, happened on an entirely unprepossessing dirt-ball going by the name of Jaris. A rancid little backwater out in the Dagellan Cluster, as it's called now, five hundred years ago from here and now. I don't know if it's even there any more.

I had a ship, of sorts, and I was making my living as a haulage contractor in a freelance kind of way - if by 'freelance' you mean hanging on to the ragged edge, a broken fingernail away from falling into starvation and oblivion.

(And you have to remember - always remember - that none of this actually happened. At least, none of it happened to me. But the memories are so much a part of me, so integral that here and now it makes no odds if I participated in these events, in any literal and technical sense.

We're not talking what I did or didn't do for real, we're talking about the memories that go to make me what, if anything, I am. Whether or not in some abstruse and ultimately technical sense they're mine. So there.)

Jaris was one of those places with only a couple of major industries: stockyards and slaughterhouses for the local variety of domesticated fauna - called *fupi*, for some reason, I seem to remember - and processing plants for strip-mined carbonites. The problem with such simple, slab-like economics was that there was nowhere people like me could make a living between the cracks. Anything approaching an honest living, anyway.

Butchered meat and anthracite were shipped off-planet in massive and specialised freighters, in quantities with which I simply couldn't compete. My ship sat, berthed out on the Jaris landing field, clocking up the dockage rental to the point where I would never get it out without a paying job.

I couldn't even sell the damn thing for scrap prices and a ticket out; nobody was buying lemons around here, if they had known what a lemon was, which they didn't.

I'd been stuck here for months, trying to put together some sort of deal with the lower strata of what passed for what you might call the criminal underclass - if you can have a criminal class when there's nothing you can really steal.

The problem was that Jaris and the four hundred-odd other non-aligned worlds in the star cluster shared everything with the Three Empires - as they were called then - and the Three Empires were collectively on one of their expansionist kicks and gearing up for war. This was disrupting the more dubious areas of trade a little more than somewhat, what with the defensive forces of every non-aligned world paranoid. And any ship that came near them without its authorisations and call-codes buttoned up so tight they squeaked was like as not going to find itself just blown out of the sky and no questions asked.

Just about the only thing you could do, with an entire galactic sector on a war footing, was be an arms trader, and I'd never traded arms. Nobody had ever trusted me with a shipful of heavy-duty weapons. Can't imagine why. Maybe my eyes were too close together or something - though what anyone could find with which to compare the distance, I couldn't imagine.

So there I was, trudging through the almost deserted streets of the Jaris Spaceport hinterlands, breath pluming from my lungs and the cold lancing up through the membrane-thin soles of my boots.

I didn't have enough for food, let alone a room to cook it and eat it in, and I couldn't even spend the nights on my ship. I wouldn't be allowed on it until I came up with the shortfall on the docking charge.

Actually, scratch that. About not having enough for food, I mean.

I sorted through the depressingly depleted remains of my Emergency Stash, and found that I had maybe enough of the small polymer plaques that served as money here for a hot meal.

Either that, I supposed, or a couple of drinks.

I did okay in the first bar, walking in as bold as brass and downing a warming cup of some local resinous balsam, walking out again and, smoothly, grabbing a big night-time coat from the rack by the door as I passed out.

The trick is to just do it without thinking; try to take a coat like it's yours and it's like a magnet: people see you trying to look all innocent, like butter wouldn't melt up your back passage.

The night-coat was simply a coverall for the light clothes worn during the warm Jaris day; valuables weren't kept in them as a rule - but in a side alley, as I pulled it apart at the seams, I found a couple of small-denomination plaques in the lining. These effectively doubled the Emergency Stash.

The remains of the coat I wrapped around my upper body, then stuck my battered leather jacket - the last relic I had from the days I spent on Planet Earth - back on over the top. If I ended up spending the night on the street, the extra layers could make the difference between life and death from hypothermia.

The next place was a Vleki bar, primarily for non-humanoids - but the sort of non-humanoids who were, uh, looking for humanoid company.

There are a lot of idiots out there in the galaxy who make a big deal of how the generally humanoid body-shape is, like, the pinnacle of 'intelligent evolution' or some such wank. Funnily enough, it only seems to be humanoid-types - or those who were *originally* human-types - who bang on like this. I mean, arachnid wotsits from out the back of beyond might invade some place and kill everybody just because they want it, but they don't go around actually *saying* that they have a right to do so, on account of the innate superiority of the arachnid shape.

Possibly, it's because almost every other body-shape you can name genuinely *is* more viable than the general human form, in every respect other than what it looks like to humanoid eyes. An arachnid

wotsit from the back of beyond can at least walk across a damn floor, in something other than a continuously compensated topple that's only one misstep away from pitching you flat on your face.

Anyhow. The point is that this humanoid-shapism, being so patently wrong and all, meant that a small but significant number of non-humanoids bought into it as a guilty little fetish. And this, for my purposes, was all to the good.

I ran a kind of *ingenue* routine, letting something polymorphous and tentacular feel up my electrobiological aura while I stuffed complimentary bar-food into my face. Then I faded off into the crowd on the pretext of going to psychically relieve myself - making it obvious that I was heading for the mind-sucker facilities officially reserved for that and that alone - and slipping out through a side door before things got too serious. There are just so many moves you can genuinely fake before you can't face yourself in the mirror.

Out on the streets again and trying to remember where it was still okay to show my face - an increasingly and depressingly small number after several weeks of nocturnal chancing. Night-culture tends toward the insular, a little world all of its own, and word tends to get around.

I settled at last on a place called the Citadel - ordinarily the sort of place I wouldn't be seen dead and putrefying in, but then again that meant there was less chance of running into people I knew. And people who knew me.

And maybe a small change of scene would change my luck.

And, not to put too fine a point on it, it did.

The Citadel of Celestial Lights (translated from the local) was what passed on Jaris as a tourist trap. With the planet itself having nothing whatsoever to offer, the few tourists it attracted tended towards being those looking for something 'unique, unspoilt and off the beaten track' - i.e. richer than the galactic-standard average, far more gullible and far, far more pretentious.

Such a clientele would ordinarily have anybody worthy of the name *hustler* rubbing their hands happily and chortling with expectant glee... had not the Citadel Central parent company and the sector-wide conglomerates that operated the tourist trade in general been perfectly aware of it.

They farmed this aspect of the tourist trade out to every respective planet's Big Boys in return for a generous cut off the top. Unsanctioned attempts at *hustling*, as such, tended to attract the

unwelcome attentions of large and muscular people with an interesting collection of electrically operated power-tools.

There was nothing, however, to stop anyone just going in there for a quiet drink. Maybe while waiting for some friend or other, from out of town or off-planet, for the simple fact the Citadel was simply the easiest place to find and meet up at.

And nothing to stop them, entirely by chance, meeting someone new and perhaps spending an evening with them - or possibly even a night - during which certain moneys might or might not naturally gravitate from the richer of the two to the poorer.

That was my story, anyway, and I was sticking to it.

In the ground-floor bar, I dug out my remaining plaques and counted them by touch.

Behind the counter, my reflection in the mirror-wall: something night-pale and battered and maybe 25, a four-day growth on a battered face with dashing broken-nose accessory.

I was having a bad hair day, but that of course didn't matter for the simple reason that anyone seeing it had absolutely nothing to compare it to. When you're the absolute and sole representative of an entire race in the world, you can pretty much go around looking like what you like.

(The weird thing is, I remember looking entirely different, even if you factor in the difference in age. That is, the image in my mind looks like a younger version of the face I can see in the mirror any day, but I seem to recall seeing a different face at the time. It's like a new picture has been stripped in over the old one, or like a different actor is playing the part of me and no one's talking about it.)

Maybe I just had a reconstructive go-over or something, at some point, and I've forgotten about it. Maybe I'm projecting my current self-image back in time to fill the gap. Can't think why I'd ever bother to change my face, though. Maybe someone was after me, or something like that, at the time.)

Ah, well, at least the teeth were pretty much all right, and the golden upper right canine gave an engaging and slightly piratical edge to the grin.

(And the fact that I of course have perfect teeth, and wisdom molars that never impacted them on account of having never been there in the first place, means absolutely nothing.)

The dark glasses probably gave me an additional touch of mystery, but I really only wore them for myself. So I wouldn't have to look at my eyes.

(You know, the thought occurs that if I went through all this self-pitying

crap every time I looked in a bloody mirror, it's no wonder I'm having trouble remembering what I looked like. I'm surprised I can remember I even had a head.)

There was no way, in my tattered mismatched spacer clothing, that I could pass for a tourist, and there was also no way I could pass for one of the official Citadel whores, who were subcutaneously tagged in any case. So I slipped into a persona that was, in a way, the perfect truth: out of place and lost, loathing the place and everything in it, but stuck here and looking for a friend.

I blew the last of my cash on something green and fluorescent with a bit of some extruded synthetic fruit on a pole sticking out of it, then leant back against the bar and scanned the room with a kind of contemptuous little scowl, doing something with my body to make it attractive.

(I don't know what I did - I just remember doing it somehow. Here and now, I don't know how to do something like that, or even where to start. Maybe it's something I lost to the artefacts. Maybe it's just a body thing, a biological thing - I mean I'm, what, still less than two years old, biologically speaking.)

Across the bar a six-armed arachnid-woman from Glomi IV caught me looking at her and gave a little wave - but I didn't really feel up to having my internal organs pureed by force-injected gastric acids and sucked out through the urethra, which always sort of tended to spoil the afterglow, in my experience.

The mobile interfacing-node of a Darian septilateral *gestalt* looked slightly more interesting - only you could never quite put the fact out of your mind that it was constantly and telepathically linked to what looked like six separate glistening membrane sacs full of pus, in a darkened room somewhere else.

The piglet people of Glomi VII (of which a tour-party were gathered further up the bar, on squat little stepladders and in what looked like garish little Hawaiian shirts, drinking something yellow and having a squeaky sing-song) were fun for a while, I supposed, but their conversation tended to pall after the third hour. I turned away from them - and as I did so a piglet person trotted down his stepladder to reveal the figure beyond.

I was moving before I fully realised it. The subsonics coming from the Citadel sound-system must have changed over or something, because I suddenly felt a kind of shaky, queasy thumping in the pit of my stomach.

The bar curved around a corner and the figure had its back to me.

Bipedal, female, dressed in a set of nondescript overalls several times too big for her.

Her hair was dark and cut in a razor crop, with the remains of definition that said it had cost a lot to do at the time, even though it was now growing out.

She was involved in an argument with one of the Citadel's mechanoid bar staff, who had evidently sold her something unfit for human beings to drink. And that was the point. That was why she had riveted my attention.

She was human.

Not humanoid, not even something indistinguishable from a human to the point where you could hardly tell. She was *human*.

The first I'd seen in more than ten years. And I'd never expected to see one again. The world went strange and I felt like I was going to collapse.

She must have caught my attention on her, this first human I'd seen in years, because she promptly dropped her argument with the bar-staff, turned and let me have it.

'Oh, bloody hell,' she snapped. 'Not *another* one of the ghastly little buggers. Listen: me no wantee good time jig-jig all-same, okay? Piss off and leave me alone!'

She didn't say it in Galactic-standard Basic,' she said it in English. Weirdly accented English, but English all the same.

That might not sound freaky to you, here and now, where Galactic Standard Basic *is*, basically, English - but you have to remember that I was taken from Earth, originally, from a time when human beings had barely made it to Earth's moon.

I would later learn that a few - a very few - human beings had been similarly abducted and were knocking around, but at the time I thought that I was utterly, absolutely unique.

(And you have to remember, always remember, that none of this ever actually happened to me in the first place.)

Anyhow. That's to explain why the simple fact of a real, live human being in front of me hit me like a bag of hammers. It was just too big to process. I only knew that this was the single most important moment of my life, my one and only chance. I had to say something, and I had to say it now.

'Urn...' I said miserably.

A hand landed on my shoulder. It had to be a hand because anything else with clawed and opposable digits like that didn't bear thinking about.

'This guy bothering you?'

That was the meaning; the words were about as far from English as it was possible to get.

I looked up at something ursine and wider than I was tall. It was one of the Fnarok bouncers that the Citadel employed to protect its well-heeled clientele from naughty men - or biological organisms of a generally naughty nature - like me. Obviously, the oddness of my demeanour and behaviour had crossed the point of ringing a couple of alarm bells.

The Citadel bouncers were, as I believe I've mentioned, rumoured to have their own, private back room where they amused themselves with a variety of power tools. This was not quite as bad as it sounds, on account of the fact that, by one of those alien quirks that seem odd to human eyes, the Fnarok as a race were rabid fans of DIY.

'Come with me,' the bouncer growled happily to me, 'and see my very interesting set of electromechanical power-tools.'

Things were looking bleak. I was in for an evening of assembling cabinets and putting shelves up at the very least.

It was at that point, though, that there was a disturbance at the other end of the bar.

The main doors burst open with a bang - and through them came a squad of the Jaris Militia, strapped into their bulky hi-impact body armor and with their reflex-trigger plasma rifles at the ready. Cops throughout the Dagellan Cluster seemed to have been recruited almost exclusively from the canine-based races, maybe for their tenacity in tracking and stuff. They cast about themselves for a moment like the beasts they so apparently resembled - and then headed directly for me.

I tried to think of anything I might have done to merit an entire Militia squad coming after me, and failed. I also tried to nip behind the bulk of the Fnarok bouncer and hide - and failed when, suddenly, I was wrenched from the bouncer's clutches, losing some leather off my jacket, a scrap of artificial fur and several layers of skin in the process.

The next thing I knew, the human girl had me in a quite painful arm lock and was pressing something hard into the small of my back.

'One step nearer and the grubby little chancer gets it,' she hollered at the advancing militiamen - who couldn't understand a word of it but got the general sense, grinding to a halt in a confusion of armaments.

'Let's all do the world a favour, yes?' the girl continued.

So obviously, then, the Militia hadn't come in here after me. They had come for the girl - and not without cause, if taking people hostage at the drop of a hat and sticking guns in their backs was any indication.

I may or may not have groaned. All in all, and all things considered, it really hadn't been my night.

The girl hustled me out of a side door, into an alley full of trash cans - into which she promptly tripped me in that way people have when they've been, at some point, trained to do something like that.

A knee was planted in the small of my back. Hands went through my pockets, and then the weight was off me.

I rolled over and looked up to see that the girl was now holding a gun I'd completely forgotten I had. I'd picked it up somewhere or other, and I don't think I'd ever used it in my life. A little flechette-ejector about the size of my index finger.

In the hands of the girl, though, it looked big enough to put a crimp in anybody's day.

She was tall, I noticed, when you were flat on your back and looking up at her. Somewhat skinny, and somehow caught between a kind of awkwardness and grace. It was as if, as a gawky adolescent, she'd damn well trained herself to move gracefully, with such determination and persistence that it had become second nature.

When she moved, she moved with a sure and quick-witted fluidity. But when she moved so surely you could catch a glimpse of the worried child underneath, trying to be brave but terrified on some deep level that she was getting it wrong. I don't know, maybe I'm projecting again.

I'd have found all this utterly charming, of course, had not one of the things she was getting wrong been to do with my little flechette-ejector's safety catch. I tried to remember what the needles were tipped with, and what its use-by date was.

'Good thing you didn't know I didn't *really* have a gun back there,' she said, smiling down at me nastily. 'A couple of knuckles doesn't really feel like one, but nobody ever feels like finding out, yes?'

I was about to reply with something pithy and pertinent, when I realised that she was simply talking at me for the benefit of herself. No surprise there, I suppose; as far as she was concerned I was just, in her words, some grubby alien chancer. She didn't expect me to understand or respond. The girl backed off a bit, then glanced down at the gun in her hand a little critically.

'I really hope for your sake it isn't true what they say about the sizes being related,' she said. 'Be a pity that, 'cause you're quite cute in a greasy ratty sort of way. I'll just bet you charm the pants off all your little alien friends. Ah well.' She shrugged. 'C'esf *la* We...'

And with a little ironic wave of her hand, she turned and darted off down the alley, losing herself in the darkness.

A couple of seconds later, the squad of Jaris militiamen tumbled out of the side door in full-on Keystone Kops fashion. I pointed in the opposite direction to the one the girl had gone and said 'she went thataway' on general principles.

I fully expected them not to believe a word of it, and haul me in for several hours of questioning with the local equivalent of a phone book, on the simple basis that life doesn't work like the movies. There isn't a bunch of people butting in over life's shoulder and pointing out all the cliches.

For a wonder, though, the militia bounded off in the direction I'd been pointing with many tenacious yelps. Probably the only time something like that has happened in my life - or at least, the memories I have of a life.

After they had gone I just sat there, in the garbage, trying to sort out my thoughts. Whoever the girl was, wherever she had come from, she was clearly bad news. Better not to get involved.

I mean, forget that she was the first human being I'd seen in something like ten years, the first and only link with Planet Earth and home I'd ever found - that wasn't going to do me any good if said link was hugely violent and would blow my head off (or at least forcibly eject little flechettes into it) as soon as look at me. Leave it alone, Jason boy, and just walk away.

I was dimly aware that I was on my feet, now, and seemingly of their own accord my feet were heading up the alley in the direction which the girl had taken. Well, I had to head somewhere, and I wasn't going to follow the cops.

I certainly wasn't trying to find the girl again, or anything like that.

A Second Life: Two

Astrology may rest on better foundations than Magic. For if no one has seen either Goblins, or Lemures, or Dives, or Peris, or Demons, or Cacodemons, the predictions of astrologers have often been seen to succeed. If of two astrologers consulted on the life of a child and on the weather, one says that the child will live to manhood, the other not; if one announces rain, and the other fine weather, it is clear that one of them will be a prophet.

The great misfortune of the astrologers is that the sky has changed since the rules of the art were established. The sun, which at the equinox was in Aries in the time of the Argonauts, is today in Taurus; and the astrologers, to the great ill-fortune of their art, today attribute to one house of the sun what belongs visibly to another. However, that is not a demonstrative reason against astrology. The masters of the art deceive themselves; but it is not demonstrated that the art cannot exist.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

For nearly two days, so far as I could reckon time, I prowled the confines of my cage.

I'd realised it was a *cage* early on, of course. All that business of me

not getting out of the doors and stuff was sort of a clue. The question now was of who or what was doing it, and there was only one obvious answer.

I might not have been going to school much lately but this was not the thing you learnt about in school anyway. It was the sort of thing you learnt from books and comics and videos on which school tended to frown.

Obviously, I'd been alien-abducted, and put in whatever aliens used for a dolls' house, or a zoo, or something like that. Or maybe the Government were doing it to me, as part of some weird kind of alien-inspired experiment.

Either way, *aliens* were almost certainly going to come into it somewhere. I could only hope that they were relatively polite aliens, and not prone to doing the somewhat brusque sort of investigations that some aliens were notoriously prone to do.

On the first day I decided to try and keep my strength up. The magically appearing bowl of goop in the kitchen was repulsive, but it didn't taste exactly *poisonous*, so I choked it down.

Then I put the bowl down on the counter, went into the corner and just squatted there, looking at the bowl.

If I really *were* in a zoo of some kind, then there would have to be keepers. If I was in a prison, there had to be warders. Somebody - or some *thing* - would have to come in and clean out the bowl. Or at least fill it up again.

I didn't suppose for one minute that I would have been able to jump on that someone (or something) like some movie hero and overpower him (or it)... but I might at least get some clue as to who (or what) was doing this to me.

So I hid in the corner, and watched the bowl, and waited...

... and woke up on the hard, fake couch with yet another headache. A stuttering behind my eyes like incipient migraine, as if coming back from an epileptic seizure brought on by strobing lights. I don't think I've ever had one of those, as such, then or now, but I imagine that's what one of them would have felt like.

In the kitchen was yet another bowl of goop. It seemed that somebody (or something) didn't want me getting even so much as a look at him (or it).

This hardly seemed fair, I thought, given that the only reason they could have for keeping me here, notoriously dubious physical investigations aside, was to look at me.

After that, I stopped eating, and just tried to sleep as much as I could. The whole bear in a cage thing, I suppose. Let them bloody work for it.

When I couldn't sleep, when my growing hunger woke me up, I wandered the fake house again and examined it, and everything in it, very carefully indeed.

This would be incredibly boring to tell you about, all the tedious hours on end, so let's just say that the only important thing I found was that since I had cut myself, all the knives from the kitchen and anything else with which I might have cut myself again had been removed.

Let's be clear, here. I wasn't looking for a way out, or for something I could use to plan an escape. I was trying to take my mind off a plan I had already worked out.

I didn't want to think about it much, because it was probably going to kill me, whether it worked or not.

After nearly two days of this, as far as I could reckon time, I found myself carefully examining things for something like the fifth time in a row... and realised that I was simply putting off the decision I'd long since made.

My stomach wasn't getting any emptier, and if I kept on starving myself for any longer I'd be too weak to do anything at all. If I was to have any kind of chance at all, I had to do it *now*.

So without any kind of fuss I walked up to the faked-up copy of my bedroom, and rammed my hand through the plate glass window, which was as real as anything. The windowpane shattered under my likewise breaking hand and my arm went through.

And I slammed my arm down on the remaining, jagged glass.

And I dragged my arm back with all the strength I had.

Not really that *much* of a plan, you might be thinking - if you didn't know the thinking behind it.

Whoever was keeping me here, they were watching. They had kept an eye on me, and zapped me when they thought it necessary, and had doctored me when I had hurt my finger on the knife.

The gash on my finger was healing under the alien plaster, but it wasn't healing supernaturally fast. This meant that the keepers didn't have the kind of bleep-machines that could instantly and magically heal people, like on TV. Or at least, they didn't waste things like that on a cut finger. In any case, they had doctors - or, more probably, vets - like anybody else.

So, maybe, if I were to hurt myself *really* badly, they'd have to take me away and put me in an animal hospital or something. Maybe there would be the chance of escaping from there, or maybe not - but whatever else, I would be out of the cage.

(The weird thing is, as I remember this, I can still feel that utter, blind impulse to be free, like a gnawing in my gut. What I mean is, it's odd that I still feel it so strongly - it was like an obsession so strong as to become disassociative insanity, something other and apart from myself. So why do I still feel it so strongly?)

Of course, there's a really simple, basic and easy answer to that.)

I knew about hospitals. I remembered when my father had broken my arm. And I remembered that it was a bad idea - incredibly dangerous, even - to eat anything for the day before a major operation. That was why, of course, I'd stopped eating the alien goop.

My first surprise was how hard it was to do, in simple terms of bodily exertion.

My second surprise was how little pain there was.

My third surprise was the sheer amount of *blood* there was.

Then the pain truly hit me - and that was the biggest surprise of all.

My last thought, I think, before I blacked out, was of a little detail in this plan that I hadn't really thought too much about.

If I were in what amounted to a zoo, then whoever was keeping me here thought of me as an animal. As a specimen, at least, something other and lesser than a person.

And sometimes, when an animal is really hurt, you don't take it to the hospital and look after it until it is well. It just isn't worth the bother.

You simply put it down.

A Past Life: Two

The same man had a violent quarrel at the Hague in Holland for having stoutly taken Barneveldt's part against an extravagant Gomarist. He was put into prison in Amsterdam for having said that priests are the scourge of humanity and the source of all our misfortunes. 'What!' he said. 'If one believes that good works make for salvation, one finds oneself in a dungeon; if one laughs at a cock and an ass, one risks being hanged: This adventure, burlesque though it is, makes it quite clear that one can be reprehensible on one or two points in our hemisphere, and be absolutely innocent in the rest of the world.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

I found the girl a little way ahead in the maze of alleyways, just standing there and looking a bit confused. I'd later learn that she had found herself on Jaris without... certain support structures on which she'd come to rely.

(The precise nature of those support structures, incidentally, I can't recall. It's probably the artefacting, or yet more memories withheld from source, but I don't know... the lack of these memories seems too clean-cut, somehow. It's as though those memories were cut from the source himself, and he didn't know about them being cut - and only I can recognise the different

tone of the loss, because I have something to compare it to. Confusing, much? Circles within circles, wheels within wheels? There will be more.)

In any case, her state was pretty much exactly as I assumed from first principles - the adrenalin rush of escape from the cops had gone, and she now found herself at a loss as to what to do.

The girl became aware of my presence behind her and spun round, bringing up her purloined gun. I tried to make myself look as inoffensive and unthreatening as possible, and was heartened to see the gun go down again.

Though somewhat disheartened in that it didn't go down all that far - just far enough that, if it went off, I could say goodbye forever to any hope of frivolity and joy in the trouser department. Not that I've ever actually frequented trouser departments for the purpose of frivolity and joy, such as might possibly be available in the changing rooms, in the first place.

'Oh, it's *you* again,' the girl said, with a note of exasperation that I would come to know very, very well. 'What do you want now?'

It was then that I made one of those decisions which I've never been sure was an astute thing to do at the time, or one of the stupidest things I've done in my life. My life as I remember it, anyway.

Working it out with hindsight, I think I was still in some form of shock. The fact of the girl raised so many issues and questions that I didn't feel up to dealing with them all at once.

In short, the girl thought I was some alien who didn't understand a word she said, so I decided to go along with it.

'*Fnerk?*' I said.

'Wonderful,' said the girl. 'I don't suppose you'd know where I can get something hot inside me?' She scowled. 'I can't believe I just said that. I mean something to eat. Something to drink?' She pantomimed forking food into her mouth.

'*Furpy-snuck-snuck?*' I said, making a gesture related to sticking something somewhere else, but not a lot to do with food. I really can't help it, sometimes, honestly. I only wish I had an idea why.

'No!' the girl said firmly. 'Food. I want *food*.' She repeated her own pantomime a little more pointedly.

'Mogo,' I said, and shrugged. I stuck a hand in my pocket and pulled out my remaining stack of money-plaques. What the hell, I thought - if she doesn't know the value of them, gods only know what she'll trade.

'Oh, I get you,' she said dispiritedly. 'You need money for that. *You* need money in general. Well, I'm afraid I haven't got any, chum.'

Oh, well. Worth a try. I put my money away. It was only later I would think upon the way the girl had pegged me instantly, from a standing start.

I might be deluding myself, imposing what I so desperately want on fractured memories, but I'll swear that there was a sense of connection even from the start. Some sense of being part of something right, and meant to be, and bigger than myself.

The girl seemed to feel something of that, too. Or maybe it was just that she didn't think of me as human, any more than you would a friendly and unthreatening animal. Vaguely, she reached out a hand - exactly as you would to pet a friendly dog.

(And I have to say, what with having mentioned them off and on, I don't think I've ever actually seen an actual dog, in real life, or even in pictures. I sort of know what one is, and what it does, but I completely fail to get an image in my mind when I think of one.

I suppose I'll sort that out, one of these days, by simple fact of being alive in a cosmos still containing dogs. I just don't happen to have got around to it yet.

I mean, who wakes up in the morning and goes, Aha! Today is the day I shall make a point of going on GalNet so I can finally find out what a dog looks like! No more imaginary dog problems for me, no siree bob!)

Anyhow. The girl seemed to want to pet me. Without thinking anything I can recall, I took the hand and held it to my cheek.

The feeling was electric. The spark of it. I can remember the feeling, but not what it felt like, if you get what I mean. I only know this: if it were possible, I'd destroy worlds to go back and really, truly live that moment.

The moment ended when she pulled her hand away from me sharply. The absence of it felt like the sting of a physical slap.

'You're doing that on *purpose*, you cheeky little sod!' she snapped angrily. 'Is that what you do? With your mind? With pheromones and stuff?'

God alone knows what, in that instant, she thought I actually was. I could only look at her blankly.

'I'll bet you don't look like that at all, really,' she said, darkly. 'You're some elementary form of empathic metamorph or something - and that's what gives you away. You look like a human and you act like an approximation of one, but your every little nuance speaks of otherness. Believe me, I know about aliens pretending to be human.'

Quite what that was supposed to mean I never found out. It was at that point, however, that my cop-alert senses went off. I grabbed the

girl and hustled her into the shadow of a wall. She struggled for a second - thinking God knows what - then got it. We remained in the sort of clinch I seem to remember from some old movie or other, on TV when I was a kid, as another squad of the Jaris Militia bounded past.

Whatever it was that the woman had done, it had certainly made her popular with the local law enforcement - or of course, you know, the exact opposite.

(It occurs to me to wonder, incidentally; picking apart these stolen memories, why the canine cops didn't simply smell us out like a shot. I might not know what they look like, but that's what dogs are supposed to be able to do, right?)

That's the problem, when it comes down to it. I'm pretty sure that certain things really happened - or at least happened to someone - but I can never be entirely sure as to the why of them.

All I can surmise is that the smell of human beings was so far out of their experience that it confused them. I mean, a truly unique smell should have been a dead giveaway - but maybe it failed to trigger a crucial neurological response, or something like that.)

In any case, while not being the sort of person who might indulge in what might be politely called ungentlemanly conduct (*I assume*) I have to admit that the feel of the girl against me was rather nice. What I remember of it. I'd like to think that she felt that way too, a little, and that when we were safe she broke the clinch with some little reluctance.

'Well,' she said with - I like to think - feigned briskness, when we had. 'Can't stand around here all night. Time I was off.' She frowned. 'Problem is that's easier said than done when you're potless. Now, if I could only get off-planet, I could get my hands on all kinds of money...'

Her words, meanwhile, had crystallised something in my own mind.

My ship, as I've mentioned, had been impounded, and try for the life of me I hadn't been able to work out a scheme to get it back. All of these discarded nascent schemes, however, had been based on the fact that I was operating on my tod. There had been no one else to count on in them - and frankly, I wouldn't count on myself if you paid me a big pig.

Now, with another person involved, any number of new and better plans would occur. Admittedly, I couldn't think of any one in particular, but that was down to mere detail.

I was also, mentally, kicking myself for getting tangled up in this whole 'uncomprehending alien' business. Things would have been so much easier to explain, otherwise.

In the end, I settled upon waving for the girl's attention, pointing up in the air and going, '*Fwoosh!*'

A Second Life: Three

All living bodies are composed of levers, of pulleys, which function according to the laws of mechanics; of liquids which the laws of hydrostatics cause to circulate perpetually; and when one thinks that all these beings have a perception quite unrelated to their organisation, one is overwhelmed with surprise.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

'Here,' said Benny, handing me the rest of the cider: 'You can finish it. It was left over from a party. Nobody wants it around, and no one's going to miss it.'

The thin plastic of the bottle crackled under my fingers. Sticky fluid welled up over the neck to slather my hand.

Funny-looking cider, I thought, vaguely. Completely the wrong colour, for one thing.

'This is wrong,' I said. This never happened. It was someone else, someone I can't remember because of the artefacts. It was never you.'

'Yeah, well,' said Benny. 'I'm just a place-holder. And this is just a dream, anyway, so it doesn't count. And now it's time to wake up.'

'Graagh!' I said, as I awoke. I've just got a spontaneous and coruscating wit like that.

I was really trying to say 'Aagh!' but my mouth and throat were full of the sort of sticky kind of gunk you get when waking with a head cold - only the gunk tasted something like the way a not particularly clean swimming pool smells.

The *reason* I was trying to say 'Aagh!' was the creature looming over me. Let's take a moment to describe this creature, shall we, because it really is quite impressive...

A collection of small and slimy globes slathered like frogspawn over the bulbous mass of what was probably a head, on account of its position on top of the body. If you could bring yourself to look closer, you'd see that each of these small globes was a separate, single, unblinking eye.

A fringe of segmented growths, sprouting from under the frogspawn eyes, lazily entwining and tangling like a collar of live earthworms. These couldn't really be called 'tentacles', because below them came the *real* tentacles.'

A slick and sinuous mass of them, far too many to count, which seemed to make up the rest of the body. There were octopus-like suckers on them, and each one seemed to end in an appendage suited for some particular use or other. From the soft tip of one, say, protruded a sharp and bony stabbing needle. Another ended in an arrangement rather like a pair of fingers and a thumb. Another ended in an electric tin-opener - though this was tied on with string, so it probably didn't really count.

All right, so, described like that, it's not all that different from what *anybody* would come up with if they were asked to describe a slimy tentacular alien monster off the top of their head. Whether that head was covered in frogspawn eyes or not. If you woke up with a mouthful of sticky gunk, though, and saw one of them looking down at you, you'd still quite probably go 'Graagh!'

The whole effect was only slightly spoilt by the fact that the creature was wearing a little nurse's hat, on a section of head from which the frogspawn eyes had slithered away. The hat had a red cross on it - scrawled there in red pen as though by a child who was vaguely aware that nurses' hats had to have crosses.

I tried to struggle up from the bed. The alien creature shoved me down again, quite gently, with a tentacle. I got the distinct impression that it could have put that tentacle through my chest if it had decided to get rough.

'Pretend-move monkey-hominid is to sucksquid-stitched with very much alacrity and puissance,' the creature said.

My mind froze, and not just because the words sounded like complete and utter gibberish. For one thing, this was the first voice I'd heard in days that wasn't in my own head and so my mind wasn't set up right.

For another, I couldn't quite work out where the voice was coming from.

Then I realised that it was coming from the wormlike growths around what... well, I suppose what we are going to have to call the creature's *neck*. As they wriggled and slithered and rasped they formed words in much the same way that the human voice is nothing more than a series of hisses and clicks. (No, really, look it up.)

'Retrogeneration is much big-big funky thing,' said the creature. *'Pretend-move monkey-hominid is present ta-very-muchly recuperation into Collective spectacle, all same. Naughty-boy pretend-move monkey-hominid must not do it again.'*

The thing seemed to be talking to itself, much in the same way that a vet might absently mutter things like 'there, there', 'good boy' and 'bugger, I've cut off the wrong leg' when working on a dog hit by a car.

(I really, really must get around to that dog thing.)

I got the impression, though, that it was *trying* to talk to me - tell me to lie still, keep quiet, not cut a big gash in my arm with broken glass again and so on - without having the slightest idea of how to do it.

'Further ingestion of nice sleepy-bye Soma much is incremental and necessary is for pretend-move monkey-hominid, all same, now,' said the creature.

Something was jammed into the side of my neck. It felt like a needle - the sort of needle you'd stick in the side of an elephant with gas. Now I came to think of it, I realised that my neck had already been hurting, as though the needle or something like it had been stuck there before.

Many times.

That didn't make it feel any better going in again.

There was a quietly gurgling, sucking sound off to one side - only, I realised, it wasn't *sucking* at all. Quite the reverse, in fact. I could feel something liquid and, let us say, not altogether pleasant being pumped into me.

I started to struggle. The creature held me down again, with

a tentacle. My vision ghosted, and a black cloud seemed to expand inside my mind - I realised that it was only a matter of seconds before I fell unconscious, yet again, and woke up back in my cage...

Just then, however, there came the sound of alarms.

They seemed to be coming from another room, but they were no less loud for that. A confused mix of what sounded like klaxons and hooters and whistles, and what sounded like chicken-squawks - it was as if someone (or something) had heard about alarms and was slightly, but very enthusiastically, getting it wrong.

(All this talk about things being wrong, incidentally, strikes me now as being... well, wrong in itself. It's that thing about humanoids I talked about earlier - we seem to be wired so that our first response to something that we don't recognise, or which doesn't fit in with our preconceptions, is simply wrong.

In fact, I would learn, a lot of the apparent wrongness was a response to perfectly ordinary input being processed by a mind suffering from a kind of synesthesia through shock - well, I'd been through a lot in my short time - and those bits that were genuinely alien and struck me as wrong, well, that was down to me being an ignorant monkey-boy who didn't yet know any better)

The creature's eyes slithered round its head towards the sound.

'Is soddy ongoing process of soddy buggery,' it grumbled. 'Is *not* one thing, is another. What is this thing that what is thing-type thinging now?'

The creature slithered out from my field of vision. There was a hissing sound, presumably that of a door opening, the sounds of the creature sliming through it.

I thought I heard some distant and violent confusion, cut off with another hiss as the putative door shut on it. For a moment there was silence.

'Well, I have no idea what *that* was,' said a sudden voice, off to the other side from which the monstrous creature had gone. 'Bit of a lucky break, though.'

Even before I knew why, I was struck by the fact that the voice was familiar. What struck me more, though, to the point where it was like a physical shock of relief - if that makes any sense - was that the voice was human. The first I'd heard in days.

'Look, are you going to just lie around like an idiot all day?' the voice continued. 'Time you were up and around, sunshine. It's time - and believe me, I never thought I'd say the phrase in this context - we blew this entire place.'

A Past Life: Three

It needs twenty years to lead man from the plant state in which he is within his mother's womb, and the pure animal state which is the lot of his early childhood, to the state when the maturity of the reason begins to appear. It has needed thirty centuries to learn a little about his structure. It would need eternity to learn something about his soul. It takes an instant to kill him.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

For a wonder, it seemed, no plans were necessary to get to the ship, elaborate or otherwise. Some kind of ultimate-level security alert, I think, which had drawn official personnel away from this area of the port entirely.

(It's crossed my mind, more than once, to try and find what that security alert was actually about - only here and now we're talking of events that happened more than five hundred years ago. There doesn't really seem to be much point, even if the information has somehow survived.)

In any event, we made it onto the landing field with little trouble, and I pointed out the ship with pantomimed pride I didn't really feel. Think the equivalent of a 1972 Ford Granada, as acquired some time around 1996, with a wire coat hanger instead of an aerial.

(And I have to say: as I wrote those words down I knew what they meant

- but thinking about them, I don't know what they mean. If you get what I mean.)

The fact that it was roughly the size of a Boeing 747 (*That meaning thing again!*) only meant that there was more of it to be unimpressive. It sat on three treadless shock absorbers and one of the engines was completely missing, having been lost, somewhere or other, in a totally memorable engine-losing incident, which would no doubt make you gasp with amazement at the sheer excitement of it, if you knew all the exciting details.

'And that's it, is it?' the girl said.

'Fwoosh,' I said, and shrugged. '*Ka-splutasplut-a-splot*, sometimes, admittedly.'

'What?' said the girl sharply. 'What did you say?'

Oops.

'*T'zhomtiines aghiti-dhlee*,' I repeated, in a little masterpiece of alien-based wordplay that for the barest moment might have sounded like English.

With nobody about to take any notice, it was the work of but a moment to lever the cover plate off the power-exchange meter and short it out. The hum from the charger hooked to the ship increased in intensity; external readouts flickered and brightened.

The girl snorted. 'Don't tell me. Let me guess. That normally costs money and you're making me an accessory to theft, yes?'

I took her by the arm and ushered her onto the ship. The lights came on and I saw, with some satisfaction, that everything was more or less as I had left it.

For a moment I breathed the happy scent of the nearest thing I had to home.

I realised, belatedly, that the girl had gone quiet. I saw that she was staring at the thing curled up on the pilot's acceleration couch - and which in turn was glaring back at her with three-eyed alien spite.

This was Shug, who I suppose was a kind of pet and bad luck charm.

It had attached itself (I was never sure of its sex, or if it, ahem, even had any) to me all those years before, when I had found myself suddenly dumped on an alien planet, and had thereafter tagged vaguely along while treating me with utter disdain.

In this it was somewhat like a cat, without looking like one in the slightest except by size.

(*I know what bloody cats look like, incidentally Oh, yes. You'd better believe that.*)

Think vicious-looking squirrel with the general proportions of a cat. Shug tended to fend for itself, subsisting quite happily on scraps and whatever vermin might be found aboard a ship, which was totally fine by me.

It hissed at the girl, baring sharp little needle-teeth - then streaked across the control cabin and scooted under my legs.

The air was throbbing and humming as the engines of the ship warmed up. I glanced at an exterior display - just in time to see that yet another squad of the Jaris Militia had turned up. Several of them.

'Aw, it!' snapped the girl, who had seen this over my shoulder.

She'd do this a lot, I would learn - mouth like a trooper. Daughter of a marine, you know. And while swearing, as it were, that such crudities would never, ever sully her lips.

(I, on the other hand, am entirely pure in thought, word and deed - and so have replaced the foulness of her tongue with those there little dashes.

Actually, the thing I'm writing this on, here and now, keeps putting them in instead of certain words as part of some sort of censoring program, and I can't work out how to turn it off.)

In any case, the girl dived for the hatch controls and slapped at them, while I busied myself trying to get us in the air under half-power. I got a working launch-sequence and the hatch slammed down just as the first militiaman-fired charge slammed into it.

For a while my attention was almost completely tied up in negotiating atmospheric breakout, and breaking away from a somewhat half-hearted salvo of Jaris Planetary Defense torpedoes that were launched after us. I was dimly aware of the girl being beside me for the initial push and the shaking around, and then that she had gone.

I remember vaguely hoping - in some rusty, dumb, male-human sense - that she had gone to make me a coffee or something. I still think of the various equivalents as coffee...

(And no, no I don't. I'm wired to think that I 'still' think of them as coffee. I've just never actually tasted this coffee I 'still' think of them as. I bet it tasted nice.)

Anyhow. I was a little disappointed when she just came back and flopped herself down on the couch. She'd no doubt simply been going through my stuff and forming opinions about me.

'That was close,' she said, chattily. 'Far too close. I can't think what I did to piss those people off for the life of me.'

I suppose I grunted something, being intent on sorting through the possible vectors for an in-system traverse.

'You're a bit of a cowardly little creep, aren't you,' she continued, with the indulgence of one who knows her words will not be understood. 'First sign of trouble and you run. Don't get me wrong, that can be really useful at times...'

'Yeah, well,' I said absently. 'One does what one can.'

A little while later, with the ship safely on autopilot and the control boards locked, I clambered towards the back of the living quarters and knocked on the hatch leading into my sleeping space. 'You all right in there?'

The hatch opened and I ducked under the mouldy *oogli* fruit, the worn-out boot and the three ceramic Malkovian mead jars that were hurled through it.

'Suit yourself,' I said.

I wandered into the cubicle that served as a kitchen area and fixed myself a mug of water from the filter tanks - anything containing actual ethanol had long since gone, and I hadn't had a chance to restock.

I downed the water, noted that the tank was nearly depleted and fixed myself another. I don't know about you, but extended and frenetic periods of fear tend to parch the throat, probably as a balancing mechanism for a certain severe dampening in the trousers.

Presently I became aware of a vaguely hostile presence behind me.

'Is everybody happy?' I said.

'Don't you bloody talk to me,' the girl said coldly.

'Suit yourself.' I shrugged. 'Anywhere you want to be dropped off, that's fine by me. I'm sure you can find some more apparent natives to patronise the living shit out of if you put your mind to it.'

The girl stared at me and then adopted a tone of chilly courtesy.

'I'll need to know where I *am*, first,' she said. 'Relatively speaking. If you would be so kind as to show me. If you have the first clue, of course.'

This did not bode well. I'd been entertaining the hope that this girl was finally, and just possibly, a way home. It was rapidly becoming far more probable that she was as much out of her depth as I was.

'You don't know where you are?' I said. 'How did you get here in the first place?'

'It's a long story. And it's none of your business. Suffice it to say, I need some background information so I know where I'm headed.'

'Nothing,' I said, 'believe me, would give me greater pleasure. What about my money? I seem to remember you saying how you could get

me some money if I got you off-planet.'

'You'll get it. Don't you worry about that.'

I grunted and led her to the control cabin, somewhat aware that the social dynamic had now shifted into the sort of cold, precise politeness as used by those who dislike each other but are stuck together. People who have to find a way of getting along without committing mutual bloody murder.

Ah well, all the overwhelmingly prominent lovey-dovey stuff, what with all its hearts and flowers and the constant soulful gazing into each other's eyes, would have no doubt become a little wearying after a while.

In the control cabin I switched on a viewer and hunted around until I found a colour-coded map of the Dagellan Cluster itself.

'That's Jaris,' I said, pointing, 'where we came from. This here's one of the independent sectors; hundred and fifty, maybe two hundred inhabited worlds this side of the Empires.'

'And what are those?' the girl said, pointing in turn to three loosely globular collections of points, highlighted respectively in ochre, cyan and viridian.

'Those?' I said. 'I just told you. They're the Three Empires. They're on the point of war over some little rotifer-speck of a planet called Moriel, apparently. Last I heard, the news-nets were saying they were holding peace talks somewhere called the Summit, but I reckon that's going to last as long as...'

'Peace talks, eh?' the girl interrupted. 'Mighty Empires paused for war? Fate of entire worlds hanging in the balance? That sort of thing?'

I shrugged. I did that a lot, as I recall. 'So they say.'

'Then that's where you're going to take me. That's where we're going.'

'You can go and stuff yourself,' I said, with the good grace and the suavity that are my watchwords. 'And not in a good way.'

A Second Life: Four

Numa did better; it was necessary to police some brigands and a senate which was the most difficult section of these brigands to govern. If he had proposed his laws to the assembled tribes, the assassins of his predecessor would have made a thousand difficulties. He addressed himself to the goddess Egeria, who gave him some pandects from Jupiter; he was obeyed without contradiction, and he reigned happily. His instructions were good, his charlatanry did good; but if some secret enemy had discovered the imposture, if he had said, 'Exterminate an impostor who prostitutes the name of the gods in order to deceive men.' Numa ran the risk of being sent to heaven with Romulus.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

Whatever the stuff being pumped into me was, it had left me weak as a kitten. A particularly weak one, you understand, as opposed to one of those tough little, ratty-looking bastards that are famous for surviving short trips to the canal in a sack and such.

'A little help, here?' I asked the strangely familiar-sounding Mystery Voice. 'Can you give me a hand?'

There was a snort. 'What am I, your keeper? You're no use to me if you can't do things, and I'm not gonna carry you. Do it yourself.'

Charming. I reached up a hand and yanked the fleshy ganglion of tubing from my throat. It didn't hurt as much as I'd feared it would, possibly because of the anaesthetic of the stuff the tubes pumped. Visual and secondary body-senses cut in, belatedly, and I suddenly realised why I'd felt so incongruous these last few days.

It was, quite definitively, an adult body.

I couldn't believe that I'd been able to do things with it, move it around, while still thinking I was an 11-year-old child. On some deep level I knew that this was the *right* way around - as opposed to, say, a child magically transplanted into an adult body, or waking up after a decade-long coma. It was the delusion of being a child that was false. This was the sort of body I was supposed to have.

At least, more or less it was. It seemed younger, and more muscular, and certainly a lot healthier than the one I instinctively knew I should have. Then again, who was going to complain about that?¹

1 Quite a lot of people, thank you, actually, now you come to mention it.

In these days where people can modify their phenotype, if not instantly then at least in the order of weeks, and then go for a walk to see what happens, it's hard to imagine the anguish felt by those who inhabit a body they instinctively feel is not theirs. And know that there will never, ever be a way of truly changing it in their lifetimes. We're talking centuries before even the most basic of the true bio-restructuring techniques, here.

To my mind, it goes some way to explaining the popularity of any number of organised religions, back then, banging on about all manner of hateful and actively evil stuff - but with the promise of an afterlife, where your body was all fixed up and made perfect. All right, I never said that my mind was anything other than simple and obvious, did I?

What's less obvious, though, to me, is why these days you still get jokers like the Church of the Righteously Ascended Pure, who believe that the human genome is the ultimate worldly expression of God's perfection, and any attempt to modify it - even to the extent of temporarily switching on a gene to re-bud teeth or regenerate an arm - is a desecration. A desecration that must be stamped out, with purely natural human feet, wherever it is found. And don't get them started on the procedures that prevent birth-defects before they start, just don't.

The moral justifications for it all, like so much else, completely escape me. I just can't see the difference between, say, reviling procedures that prevent a child being born paraplegic (and murdering the people who perform them) and snapping the spine of a child after it's born. The Church of the Righteously Ascended Pure would no doubt say I have a vested interest. Actually, they'd probably say, 'Die, contaminated spawn of bastard science!'

Anyhow. If you're wondering why I'm bringing up this CRAP, here and now, then read on. You'll find out. Oh, yes, you will.

These bodily impressions and realisations, though, were merely happening in the background. I can look back on them, now, and see that this was when I assimilated them.

What I was focused on at the time was something entirely else.

I stared at the hand clutching the fleshy tubes, which had come away without much blood, the fluid in them gushing for a moment and then subsiding to a dribble. Or rather, I stared at the forearm, to which the hand was attached in the normal human manner.

Attached to the forearm was something that wasn't human or natural at all. It looked like a cross between a headless centipede and a spinal column, each segment about the size of the joint on the end of a finger. Rows of little pincer-like legs clenched themselves together in my flesh.

'Yeurgh!' I said, eloquently. Well, you would, wouldn't you? 'Shit!'

I made to pull the horrid thing off of me and fling it away.

'I wouldn't do that,' said the Mystery Voice. In case you haven't noticed, you know, just in case it's slipped your mind, that's a nasty gash you have in your arm. I think you nicked an artery, come to think of it. That's pretty much all that's keeping you alive.'

Panicked and confused though I was, I wasn't entirely lost to stupidity. I consciously forced my hand away from my arm. I mean, my other hand from the arm with the hand I was talking about earlier. I don't mean that hand detached itself and floated around the room or anything.

(In a galaxy containing several species I can think of, off the top of my head, where such things can happen as a matter of course, such distinctions are important - if only so when I say something like 'my eyes slid down the front of her frock' some people don't get quite the wrong idea. Ick.

If I keep on with it, though, we'll be here all night and no nearer, so I suggest you go on GalNet and find some ergonomic data as to what the basic human body can be reasonably expected to do in a given situation. Okay?)

I hauled myself up and swung my legs down from the slab and, finally, as much for the sake of ignoring the thing on my arm as anything else, turned my attention to the owner of the Mystery Voice.

He didn't look anything like me. He was about the same age, I suppose, as I inwardly knew myself to be, but a little weaker-looking and a hell of a lot scruffier.

I knew, in myself, that I wasn't vain or anything, but I seemed to remember knowing I was a bit stronger and looked after myself better than that.

His unshaven face was all wrong, too, in any number of subtle little ways, as though it had been reversed. Because, of course, I'd mostly only ever seen it in a mirror.

It's a hugely uncomfortable feeling, I'm here to tell you, to realise that you look nothing like what you imagine yourself to be. Especially when you can't quite consciously remember what your imagination of yourself was.

'Got it in one.' He grinned, exposing imperfect, uneven teeth. 'I'm you. Well, not *really* you... and for that matter, *you're* not you, either. It's all a bit complicated...'

(Ha! You're telling me.)

He was lounging against the wall, in a battered leather jacket and jeans. Set into the wall was a ventilator grille, behind which he had obviously been hiding while the alien creature went about its ministrations.

'...' I tried to say something, anything at all, and failed. All this 'you and you' talk seemed to have jammed my brain solid. I looked at... the other me, and all I could think of was that I couldn't work out what to call him. I mean I couldn't think of him with the same name as...

I couldn't remember my own name!

I just stood there, desperately trying to remember it. It was like I was scrambling around, as an actual thing inside my head, but everything in it was broken or shattered and piled together in a jagged mass that cut me as I pawed through it...

'Snap out of it!' the other me shouted. 'I told you I wasn't going to carry you. I'm getting out of here, with or without you, before it's too -'

The door at the other end of the chamber slid open, and the slimy tentacular monster with a nurse's cap on slithered through.

'My, *what is most naughty and obstreperous monkey-boy doing out of nice warm soma bed?*' it gurgled. '*Must be tucked in and made all nice and sleepy-bye!*'

'... before it's too late,' said the other me, dispiritedly. 'What are the odds?'

The creature advanced upon us. In one tentacle it held a syringe, which it had produced from somewhere or other, about twice the size of a turkey-baster and suitable for use on an adolescent elephant.

(The noble elephant. One of a great many animals, I'll have you know, of which I know precisely what one looks like. It looks like an elephant.)

The syringe splurped a little as the creature depressed the plunger to lose an air bubble. Things were looking black for us, and no mistake...

And then there was a *zap*. An interlacing of electrical-energy tendrils crawled over the creature, and every single one of its frogspawn-eyes bulged to twice their normal size. It slumped forward to slop onto the floor like a plastic bag filled with water.

Behind it stood a slim girl, markedly shorter than average but making up for it by holding a big gun, the taser-bayonet bolted to the snout still sparking from when she had zapped the creature. Petite is the word, I think. For the girl, that is, not the sparking and snouted and bayoneted etc. gun.

She wore lightweight combat armour of a battered, mismatched kind that seemed vaguely piratical rather than military. Her vacuum helmet was off, clipped to webbing at her waist, to show cropped hair and a quick-witted, sharp-featured face.

The other me stared at her, obviously recognising her.

'Mira?' he said. 'What *are you* doing here?'

For my own part, what with still suffering the effects of shock and confusion and all, I was simply irritated at yet another interruption in the pressing business of trying to remember my own name.

I almost had it. I almost had my name. It was...

'Jason?' the girl said. 'Are you okay? I got here as soon as I...'

She trailed off, momentarily. Then her eyes narrowed, taking in the pair of us with suspicion.

'You're not Jason,' she said. 'Who the hell *are you*?'

A Past Life: Four

Marriage makes man wiser and more virtuous. The father *of a* family, near to committing a crime, is often stopped by his wife whose blood, less feverish than his, makes her gentler, more compassionate, more fearful of theft and murder, more timorous, more religious.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

Eventually, we struck a deal of sorts, me and the girl. I would take her as far as a Dakhaari outpost by the name of Kalas - Dakhaar being the closest of the Empires - and from there she was on her own. Thereafter we contrived to ignore each other, so far as it was possible to ignore the only other person on a ship.

That was fine by me. First human girl I'd seen in years she might be, but I'd seen the way she treated people she didn't have to be nice to - what with being there at the time - and I didn't like it one bit.

It was a bit of a shame, all things considered, that all this dislikability was wrapped up in what, by any standard, was a supremely gorgeous package. It just didn't seem fair, somehow.

Fortunately, there were other things to occupy my mind than this conundrum. A small problem involving the fact that, with the arrival of the Jaris Militia, we'd had to leave without a proper power-charge.

'That has got to be the worst bit of piloting I've ever seen in my life,' the girl said sourly, rubbing at an elbow that had been bumped on a console during deceleration. 'And I've seen a few. Are we there yet?'

I snorted and tapped a viewer displaying an array of disks connected in series by vector-lines.

'What do you think this is?' I said. 'Science fiction? It's, like, 97 light years to Kalas. It's going to take at least a *gik*.' I totted the sum up on my fingers for effect. 'That's three or four days, give or take.'

'This is one of the sub-line service stations. It's dormant now, what with the general economic slump around these parts, but the energy cores should still be hot and it's the best I can do.'

I reorientated the ship. Through the canopy, a spiderlike, unilluminated mass of apparent blackness blocked out the background stars.

'We had to leave Jaris before we were properly charged,' I explained. 'We were pushing hard even to make it this far. Plus we didn't have time to replenish the air and water tanks. The water doesn't matter 'cause we *make* it in an almost closed system, but supplementing the air's important. Four more hours, five hours tops, before we go all sort of anoxic.'

The girl looked at me with the same look she had used when she had first set eyes on the ship. And for pretty much the same reason, I suppose. 'So what are we going to do?'

I shrugged. 'I'm going to send out a bona fide distress signal. That'll reactivate a couple of service-protocols, and normally the station would transfer us minimal power and resources to make it back to Jaris... only I'm going to paste in a couple of code sequences to make it think we're a couple of hundred times bigger than we are. That should give us enough to make it maybe halfway to Kalas.'

I never like to brag - in fact I never brag, ever, and people come from all over to look at me not bragging - but I believe I owed myself a small preen:

'I cooked up the code sequences myself, by the by, what with being a bit of a technological genius on the quiet. Renaissance man, me. You may kiss my ring.'

'And you can kiss mine, sunshine,' said the girl.

'I see the spirit of the music halls is not yet dead,' said I.

'Ta-dah, boom, ching,' said the girl.

We drew closer to the dark mass. I activated the external spotlights and tiny but slowly expanding dots of brightness tracked across the station's surface, expanding until it was discernible that they were illuminating metal.

I jockeyed the controls, locating an airlock, and slowing the ship to almost a dead halt until, presently, there was an impact and a clang and the complex locking of securing mechanisms.

Seat-of-the-pants piloting is something you're born with (*and something I can only hope this version of me retains, buried somewhere where I might eventually find it*) so I can't lay much credit to it. Apparently, though, it impresses the hell out of people who can't do it. I remember vaguely hoping that the girl was suitably impressed.

I flicked a switch to kill the artificial gravity. 'Don't want to mess up the equilibrium. These things build up, and the Control incorporation-hives get a little shirty when their service-stations go spinning catastrophically out of control.'

I boosted myself from the couch and kicked in freefall to the airlock hatch.

'Now ordinarily we could do all this by remote,' I said, 'only my remotes don't work...'

'Now why,' said the girl, 'does that not surprise me.'

'... so we're going to have to go inside and run back a couple of cables and gearchains and tubes. No big deal, it's doable.'

I opened the inner airlock door, checked the interior/exterior pressure-ratio on the hydraulic display set into the outer hatch, and hit the lever that would open it.

Then I hit it again. And again. Then I checked the status readouts. 'Bugger!'

'What's up?' the girl asked.

'The Militia gunfire,' I said. 'The hatch is fused to the hull. Only in a couple of places but it's on the outside. 'There's no way we can get to them and there's no way out.'

A Second Life: Five

The present is delivered, it is said, of the future. Events are linked to each other by an invincible fatality: it is Destiny which, in Homer, is above even Jupiter. This master of gods and men declares that he cannot stop his son Sarpedon dying in his appointed time. Sarpedon was born at the moment when he had to be born; he could not die otherwise than before Troy; he could not be buried elsewhere than in Lycia; had at the appointed time to produce vegetables which had to be changed into the substance of a few Lycians; his heirs had to establish a new order in his states; this new order had to exert an influence over the neighbouring kingdoms; from it resulted a new arrangement of war and peace with the neighbours of the neighbours of Lycia: thus, the destiny of the whole world has been dependent on Sarpedon's death, which depended on Helen being carried off; and that was necessarily linked to Hecuba's marriage, which was linked to the origin of things.

If only one of these facts had been arranged differently, another universe would have resulted: but it was not possible for the present universe not to exist; therefore it was not possible for Jupiter to save his son's life, for all that he was Jupiter.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

'I wouldn't expect too much out of laughing boy, here,' said the other me, disdainfully. The state he's in, I reckon he's having trouble keeping his autonomic functions going and walking at the same time.'

This was hurtful, but true. He had briefly explained to me who Mira was - or at least, who he *remembered* she was better than I did. A friend with whom he/we/I had worked, from time to time, cyber-modified to be a telepath. Or at least, to simulate telepathy to a certain extent, in the way that people think it works, even though the way that people think it works doesn't actually exist.

The thing about that was, as he told me these things I would sort of remember them. Oh, yes, of course, she's Mira and I know her, she's a psionic... Only these memories would just come as little packets of recognition, unrelated to anything else. I couldn't come up with any specific instances of us being friends, and working together, or anything more than I'd been told. I simply didn't know where to start.

We were hurrying, now, through narrow empty corridors which I formed the impression they were never actually full - the sort of corridors used simply on occasion for people to get where they needed to go, as opposed to thoroughfares constantly bustling with life.

There was a tang of smoke in the air, the sounds of fighting coming from directions we tried to avoid.

The air was warm, which was fortunate in that I was still quite naked. There had not even been so much as a hospital gown to be found back in the medical chamber, and the other me had refused point blank to give me a borrow of his leather jacket.

This struck me as unfair - I mean, he'd have still had all his other clothes on, wouldn't he? So much for the idea that if you ever actually met yourself, you'd like him. Or even be able to so much as stand him, half the time.

I remember wondering what the point was in heating these functional and mostly unused corridors, but I'd later learn that was the wrong way round. We were in, I'd later learn, a null-orbital bio-facility - a space station, basically, free-floating out in the Catan Nebula. And at some point I'd learn where the Catan Nebula actually was.

The facility was hermetically sealed, like a vacuum flask, and the trick wasn't to heat it. The trick was getting rid of the cumulative heat produced by the inhabitants, so we didn't all boil alive.

Anyhow. When Mira had said 'Jason,' I had known, instantly, that

that was the name I'd been searching for. The name Jason seemed to fit, in the same way that something like, say, Jeremy didn't. It was the nearest thing to a proper label on the package that was me, even if it didn't properly describe the contents.

I'd also realised, on some deep level, that it was one hell of a lot more complicated than that, so it was not a huge blow to find that neither the other me nor myself were the 'Jason' she was expecting, and that she damn well wanted to know who we were. Besides, I think my senses of shock and confusion had been burnt out for a while. I was in no fit state to react to any more shocking and confusing things.

The other me had opined, however, that we might not have been who she wanted - whoever *he* was, ultimately - but we were what she'd got. She had obviously come to help get someone out of trouble, so she might as well go about it while an explanation of sorts occurred.

Now, as we headed through the corridors, Jason explained. I get the distinct feeling he was doing it as much as for me as for Mira:

'Some while back,' he said, 'your guy had this idea for a neat little scam to, you know, replenish the old cash supplies...'

Mira sniffed, then snorted as a little smoke went down the wrong way.

'Sounds like him,' she said, when she could speak.

'Thing about it was,' the other me continued, 'to make it work, he needed to be in two or three places at the same time.'

As the other me said this, a small bundle of memories hit me. I remembered I'd written something, of some sort. What it was, the precise nature of it, I couldn't say. I just remembered that I'd secretly been really, really proud of it... but I couldn't say so, on account that every other bugger and his dog had not thought it worth a damn.

(What is it about dogs? Why is it, every other thing is about bloody dogs? Why are they on my mind so much? I really have to get around to looking at one.)

What I'd needed, I remembered thinking, was someone else in my corner. Someone who knew exactly what I'd done, and what was behind it. Someone who could talk it up...

'So he thought, what could be simpler,' the other me was saying, 'than getting some bootleg med-tech to knock up a couple of cheap bio-template copies. Easiest thing in the world. Problem solved.'

'Now I remember thinking how clever I was and patting myself on the back, you know, mentally speaking, until the med-tech pushes

the button, I open my eyes, find myself five feet to the left and go, oh, *bugger*. I suppose you could call me 2Jason, 'cause I'm a copy.' He shrugged. 'Should be 1Jason, really, on account of being a *first-generation* copy, but what the hell, that's too easy to confuse with the original.'

He said 'the original' with flat distaste, as if the original didn't deserve the distinction, so far as he was concerned. I have to say, listening to this, I knew how he felt.

'So what about him?' Mira asked, gesturing towards me with the hand not currently toting her big gun.

'Oh, he's a 3Jason by now,' said 2Jason, 'at the very least. What happened was, things got a bit out of hand with the guy's scam. In the end he had to make another copy...'

'That's him?' asked Mira. 'He'd still be a first-generation, yes?'

'It wasn't that,' said 2Jason. 'We did a deal with... one of the guy's rivals you might say, ballsed up the original guy's little scam in return for a trip out here to the Catan Nebula, so we could get fitted out with proper bodies. Memoplexially decanted into truly bio-organic templates, yes?'

(There was something missing, I thought, in all this. That wasn't the only reason we had come out here. Somebody had told us, hadn't they? Not to come here, exactly - but to go away from somewhere else...)

2Jason scowled. 'Problem was, we jumped the gun. The deal was in place before there were *three* of us, and the bastards refused to stump up the extra.

'Three people fighting for two shots at life would have got incredibly complicated and dangerous, specially since it would have been the exact same people fighting... so we made a sort of deal between ourselves. Put the credit in *escargot*...'

'Escrow,' I said, as the word just popped into my head. '*Escargot* is snails.'

'He has his moments, doesn't he,' said 2Jason. 'So, anyhow, we put the credit into escrow, thank you very much, and just basically went our separate ways. Waiting for the guy to come up with the extra - good luck with *that* - or trying to scratch it together on our own. It seemed best to split up and increase the chances that one of us would strike lucky...'

That wasn't the only reason, I thought, to split up and leave... what was it? What was it called? The Collection! That was what it was called - though I couldn't for the life of me remember what it was supposed to be a Collection of.

There had been something in this Collection, though, that we had needed to get way from. Something - no, *someone* - who I associated with feelings of loss and pain that seemed too big and complicated for me to get a handle on.

Probably well out of it there, then, I thought.

'... can't tell you too much about the others,' the other me was saying. 'I bumped into one of them occasionally and we had a few adventures. I considered adopting a new name, on account of how names have power and whatnot, you can build your own identity on them... But there didn't seem much point until I got a body that wasn't so temporary.

'There wasn't too much of a rush about it, though. Our bodies might have been cheap and disposable, but they could last a few years... or so we thought.'

'So you thought?' said Mira.

'Something was wrong with the fabrication process,' 2Jason said grimly. 'Drastically reduced product-life; we were dying from the instant we were made.'

A Past Life: Five

Is it not very natural that all the metamorphoses with which the world is covered should have made people imagine in the Orient, where everything has been imagined, that our souls passed from one body to another? An almost imperceptible speck becomes a worm, this worm becomes a butterfly: an acorn transforms itself into an oak; an egg into a bird; water becomes cloud and thunder; wood is changed into fire and ash; everything in nature appears, in fine, metamorphosed. Soon people attributed to souls, which were regarded as light figures, what they saw in more gross bodies. The idea of metempsychosis is perhaps the most ancient dogma of the known universe, and it still reigns in a large part of India and China.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

In the cargo hold of the ship, the girl looked at me with frank astonishment

'You're going to go out like that?' she said. 'Don't you have a space suit or something?'

I scowled under the elasticated bandages with which I was wrapping my head.

'Yeah, right,' I said. 'I suppose that where you come from they have

special falling-out-of-car suits for every time you fall out of a car. This is what I've got.'

I pulled on a pair of gloves and licked the air seals on a pair of goggles before settling them on my face. Thank the various gods my trousers are relatively tight, that's all I can say. The last thing I need is absolutely everything of personal value prolapsing.'

I sorted through the junk strewn thinly through the hold until I found a length of line.

Something else moved in the junk; I reached out a hand and snagged an irate and struggling furry three-eyed alien creature.

'I think you'd better take Shug up front with you.' I said, holding the little thing out and trying to keep its claws from off my jacket.

'Shug?' The girl looked at Shug. 'It suits him.'

I tossed my somewhat pet through the forward hatch, then hauled myself over to the cargo doors. I tied one end of a line to a bulwark, the other to my belt, to which a couple of sealed pouches and a knife on a lanyard were already attached.

I turned back to the girl. 'Now remember: you go back and dog every set of hatches behind you before you hit the cargo door controls. That should deal with the forced decompression. It cuts you off from the working replenishment systems but it should leave you with at least ten minutes' breathable air up front. And if I don't come back in ten or 15 minutes I won't be coming back at all.'

'You really know how to inspire confidence in a girl,' she said.

I shrugged yet again. 'I've done this before. It's no big deal - though if you ever want to try something *really* tricky, try pressing a button up the front when you're on your own and right back *here*.'

I thought of something. There might be some oxygen left in the emergency tanks; I don't know. To tell you the truth, I don't think I've ever actually checked them. If you get a slow leak or something up there it might be an idea to crack them open. You know the smell?' I tried to remember something applicable from Earth. 'Like matches?'

'I'm quite aware of the signs of slow decompression,' the girl said, 'thank you very much.'

'You're quite, quite welcome.' I flipped her a halfway-recollected finger-signal I hadn't consciously remembered for years.

The girl went back through the hatch and I heard the various clangs and ratchets as it was secured. Then I stared straight ahead at the cargo doors and tried to stop my shaking as second piled on endless second and the seconds stretched to minutes...

I had never, in fact, done this before. It had just seemed like a good

idea to suggest at the time. In the hope that someone *else* would point out that it was a bloody stupid idea, be forced to come up with something better and then be honour-bound to do it herself.

Only of course the girl hadn't. Bitch.

I stared ahead at the doors, noting with a kind of mild and emotionless interest how the gasket seals were almost shot. I was going to have to replace them the next time I serviced the ship, and definitely before I got another proper job; the port authorities of most planets tended to look askance at vehicles that inadvertently jettison their cargoes the moment they hit vacuum.

I was just thinking this, as I recall, when the locking mechanisms *chunked*, the cargo doors burst open and I was blown out into a very large slice of said vacuum.

The ship was positioned laterally to the station. The outrush of air launched me on a trajectory that would have me missing it completely. Fortunately, I hadn't been aiming for it in the first place. The line attached to my belt brought me up short, almost rupturing my kidneys in the process, and I hung there for a while as the decompression wind blasted past me.

And then the wind was gone, and there was a moment of blessed relief before a million tiny things exploded and ruptured inside me and I swelled. Sweat boiled from my pores and supercooled the surface layers of my skin.

This was not, I remember, exactly fun.

I kept my mouth clamped shut and hauled myself back on the line, grabbed the sill of the open cargo doors, pulled myself around until I was facing the station, then boosted myself across the gap.

Only then did I remember that I had forgotten to cut the line. The fun, she never go from here. The fun, she never stop.

I grabbed the knife on my belt, fumbled it, retrieved it, sawed frantically at the line and had almost sawn through it when it went taught and snapped, not stopping me dead but killing a lot of my momentum...

It was maybe five seconds before I hit the side of the station - and realised I had misjudged my trajectory.

There was absolutely no way I could make the access-hatch.

I've put a section break in here, because I think that this is one of the first times I ever experienced - the actual person who had the experience, I mean - an actual temporal lapse. A fracture in time.

Such things are possible, I know, but I think for this particular one I achieved it in the hard and simply human way - i.e. by going simply and completely bugnuts.

I have absolutely no memory, reclaimed or otherwise, of the next few minutes - and I don't think that's to do with the artefacts or anything else. I think I just went mad from terror. I can only assume that this madness and terror allowed me to perform some otherwise physically impossible manoeuvre and got me through the station's hatch - I just don't know, and don't think I ever will.

I came to my senses shuddering with recovery from hypothermia and gasping for breath, with lungs that felt like they'd been filleted. A kind of jagged pain deep inside them that made me want to puke. This is one of the worst possible things to do inside a pressure-suit, in my experience, so wasn't I just lucky that I didn't have one on.

I was in an airlock, under pressure, hard white inert-matrix fluorescents dazzling me.

A cover plate hung off the bulkhead, by one of the folded-over, interlocking connectors that in the Dagellan Cluster were the common equivalent of screws. The clockwork-based mechanisms behind the panel were linked by a bridging gear-chain - one of the several I had brought along in my pouches, in case I had to do that very thing.

I must have made it to the airlock, found that the mechanisms inside were inoperable, and activated them again on the fly. This was so far out on the limits of possibility that my desperation must have been nothing short of superhuman.

(Either that, or something other than the human really was in operation. At this point, it's not a question of whether or not there's anything out there. It's a question of which one of the buggers it is this time.)

There were lesion-ridges swelling up from between the bandages on my face. My nose was clotted with crusty blood and my wrists and calves had swelled like small, bruised balloons where they met my boots and gloves. Whole areas of exposed skin were flaking into dry, cold powder.

I had never felt better in my life - but finding that you *are* alive will tend to do that, I suppose.

I opened the inner hatch and hauled myself into the thin and musty air of dormant, dim-lit gangways.

I had gotten turned around a little, what with narrowly escaping certain death in the cold hard vacuum of space and so forth, and it was five minutes or more before I found the airlock that was actually

connected to the ship. It took another ten minutes working on the blaster-welded seams, with a little acetylene cutter, before I could get the hatch open.

There was an inrush of air, disconcertingly strong even under the minimal reserve pressure at which the station was maintained.

'Damn,' I muttered, launching myself through the hatch and into the control room.

Shug was very much alive and scolding at me, from where it was entangled in the straps of one of the couches.

The girl was floating by the control console, utterly limp, her mouth slack.

She hadn't been breathing actual vacuum but I knew, while she hadn't started haemorrhaging, that there hadn't been enough pressure to force oxygen through the capillaries and into her bloodstream.

(I remember knowing that at the time, I mean, not that I knew that now before I remembered it. I think, if I had been confronted by a similar situation before just now, when I remembered, I'd just be all dithering around like a spare tool in the box and wondering what the hell was going on.)

Her face was deathly pale, her lips blue, and I thumbed up an eyelid to see that her eyes had rolled up inside her head.

I then, as I recall, spent fully a quarter of a minute panicking. I knew how to resuscitate anoxia cases, had done so pretty much successfully a few times... The problem was that I had never done so on a human.

The last time, maybe a year before, had been on an Oolonian, the correct method of which was to hit them repeatedly in the face with a spanner. And for some weird alien reason that makes no sense to the human mind, *it actually had to be a spanner*. I somehow didn't think that would do much good in this case.

Eventually I calmed down a bit and decided that *anything* was better than nothing. I hauled her to me, locked my arms and legs around her to give some purchase and pressed her to me rhythmically while sucking and blowing into her mouth.

After I remembered to take my mouth from hers between breaths, things went a little better. I have to say that I was doing any number of things completely wrong, in any medical sense, but I'd like to hope I did more good than harm.

In fact, things seemed to be going swimmingly - right up until the point where she hauled off and hit me.

* * *

Several initially hectic minutes later, I pressed a grubby, blood-soaked bit of towelling to my nose. 'I dthink id's *brokub* you bitch!' I said, with remarkable restraint, I feel, given the general circumstances.

'Yes, well, you shouldn't have given me a shock like that,' the girl said. 'Don't - and I want you to be really clear about this - don't you *ever* touch me again, in any shape or form, without my express permission. I think I'd rather die first.'

'Dod't you worry about it,' I said with feeling, if a little indistinctly. 'I dthink I'd rather let you.'

I started to strip off the bloody bandages that still wrapped most of my face. Those portions that were revealed must have looked a little hurt - I mean, I'd only been trying to help and all - because the girl let out one of her patent-pending exasperated sighs.

'Look, okay,' she said 'I've had a bit of medical training, here and there. Come here....'

She reached out a not particularly gentle hand to help with the bandages, but I batted it away. All of my face hurt, and I didn't want her poking and prodding at it.

'Don't do me any favours,' I said sourly. 'I didn't do any of this for you. I just sort of wanted to be able to breathe in the next day or so. I don't care anything about you.'

The girl snorted. 'That's perfectly obvious. You do realise that we've been together for something like 24 hours, now, and you haven't even bothered to tell me your name? Or ask mine?'

This was perfectly true. I don't think it meant anything either way, though. It was just the result of being a company of two - you don't need to think in any other terms than 'me' and 'you'. You need at least one more person around before things get complicated enough to need some actual names.

I shrugged. 'Jason Kane, for your information.'

'And for your information, I'm... Bernice Summerfield. Professor Bernice Summerfield.'

The way she said it, I got the impression that she expected it to mean something. Didn't mean a thing to me. I suppose it would have been nice if it had, if I'd received some intimation of how important the name would become to me - but I can't seem to make it happen even with back-projection, no matter how hard I might care to try.

'So?' I said. 'Well, if Professor Bernice Summerfield feels up to lugging some cables, tubes and dynamo chains around, maybe we can get out of here some time in the next decade.'

A Second Life: Six

The world can exist only by contradictions: what is needed to abolish them to assemble the states of the human race? But from the manner in which men are made, it would be a fresh contradiction if they were to agree. Assemble all the rabbits of the universe, there will not be two different opinions among them.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

'Strikes me,' said Mira, 'that you could say that about anybody - we're all dying from the moment we're born, yeah?'

'Not this fast,' said 2Jason. 'Not with the degradation so pronounced. And can I just thank you, by the way, for your monumental sympathy and concern.'

'Don't mention it,' said Mira.

'It was a combination of shoddy fabrication and the fact that I... the guy, the original guy, decided to hold some key memories back. Keep them for himself. Big mistake.

'A man is the sum of his memories, so they say, and if you monkey around with them, your whole sense of identity starts to collapse. And leave alone the question of all the artifacts...'

'Artefacts?' asked Mira. 'What sort of artefacts?'

The way she said the word rang several bells for me. Huge ones.

I caught a dizzying, kaleidoscopic profusion of mental images: golden Buddha-idols with green glowing eyes, carved gemstones alight with an inner fire, jewelled ceremonial daggers with burning blades...

A whole confusing bunch of artefacts and totems and whatnot, basically, most of them for some reason glowing. The idea of them, glowy or otherwise, seemed to be connected to the idea of something - of *someone* - so important to me that the idea was too big to properly articulate.

The mere fact of this... person, was so big that it was impossible to comprehend, like trying to fit an entire planet into your field of vision when you're on it, on the crust, face down in the dirt.

'I'm not talking about those sorts of artefact,' said 2Jason. 'I'm talking about what happens when you make lossy copies of a digital file - you get all these artefacts and pixelation up on the screen?'

'Can't say I've ever noticed anything like that,' said Mira.

'Yeah, well, different times and different technologies,' said 2Jason. 'I'm from a time - well, I sort of remember a time - when videotapes were like the cutting edge of the World of Tomorrow...'

He looked blank for a moment, and then recovered.

'Can't quite seem to picture what a *videotape* actually was. Sort of on a spool or something, I think. And that's the point.

'I mean, quite apart from the memories that were withheld in the first place, there's all these little random holes. The off-side rule. What Stilton cheese tastes like. Bunch of stuff like that, a lot of it totally unimportant - but some of it vital to the function of the whole.

'That's what happened to one of us, apparently. He tried to access some massive pocket of information that simply wasn't there, and since the brain in which his mind was living was basically artificial, it didn't have the resources to compensate. Set off a cascade-collapse. His brain short-circuited and, literally, crashed. Crashed hard - there was nothing left in the end. Nothing worth recovering, anyway.'

'One of you?' Mira asked. 'Which one?'

'How the hell should I know?' 2Jason snorted. 'I just know it wasn't *me*. Other than that, I don't know which one died, and which one laughing-boy here is, and I don't particularly care.'

I was getting a bit sick of 2Jason's dismissive attitude towards me. If I hadn't been so preoccupied with slogging one foot in front of the other through the steadily increasing and burnt-meat-tasting smoke, I might very well have said something somewhat tart.

'With one of us gone.' 2Jason was continuing, 'all bets were off.

I was stuck out on the Palovar Alteris dark matter zone, doing this thing, nothing important, when I got the news, and I only made it here to the Catan Nebula and this manufactory facility in time.

'They patched up my thought-processes as a stop-gap, uploaded a generic synaptic lexicon so that I could at least function while they prepped an organic body-generator for download. Chummy here - 3Jason - had got here ahead of me and already gone through that process, so I spent some time checking in on him... and found that things were very wrong indeed.'

'Wrong?' said Mira. 'How so?'

I was sort of wondering about that myself. In the past few hours I'd gone from believing I was a child, to realising that I was an adult who thought he was a child, to being an adult who thought he was a child in the wrong body.

And let's leave aside the fact that all I had to go on was what was being told to me by... well, by *me*.

I'm here to tell you; I'm not exactly the most reliable of sources, for any number of reasons and on any number of things. But then again, why would I possibly want to lie to myself?

Don't answer that. That's rhetorical.

These constant, almost cavalier, redefinitions of myself were getting to me. It was like the world was amusing itself by constantly whipping the ground out from under me, every time I thought I'd found somewhere relatively solid to stand.

At this point, I would have hardly been surprised if the walls of the corridor had hauled themselves up like scenery flats to reveal the Gods or some such, saying, *'That was a great game, Thrognar, God of Pretending to Be Things, where you pretended you were the copy of a copy of a man named Jason Kane! You can stop now.'*

And I would.

It was like that thing you get people always banging on about, when the talk turns ontological: was I a king dreaming I was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I was a king?²

2 The solution to this is actually quite simple, in the same way that the sound of one hand clapping is the sound it makes against your forehead when you realise the trick. (1) Assume for the sake of argument that consensus-reality, what we 'know' about the external physical world is generally correct. You stub your toe on rocks, water is wet, planetary bodies orbit stars and all the whatnot. Given that... (2) Does what we know of as a 'king' have sufficient mental capacity to dream? (3) How about a butterfly? (4) Job done.

I mean, I could even have been the last meal of some mind-sucking alien monstrosity from out the back of beyond of God knows where. Some bubble of mental indigestion while my physical and mortal remains resided in its digestive tract.

Not a happy thought.

'The transfer-process is based on nanonetic bio-organisms, apparently, which physically "eat" the matrix in which the identity-construct is stored...' said 2Jason.

Thank you very much, I thought.

'... building tissue as they go to an incredibly detailed genomic template. The end result, phenomenally speaking, is a living brain - human in absolutely *every* respect apart from the fact that it wasn't made by, you know, a man and a lady meeting each other...'

'I know all this,' said Mira irritably, obviously resenting the distraction of her attention from gauging where the fighting was coming from. 'Why are you bothering to tell me all this?'

'I'm not talking for the benefit of you,' said 2Jason. 'So, anyway, you stick the living brain in a common or garden gene-skein unit, grow the body from the top down and the inside out, heave in a couple of genetic patches to deal with problems like a vermiform appendix and impacting wisdom molars, and Bob's the laterally familial relative of your choice.'

'No other enhancements?' asked Mira, raising an eyebrow. 'I know what you men are like. Always wanting another couple of centimetres.'

'Yeah, well I - this guy here, what's left of him - was probably a bit of a stingy git, and just went for the basic package,' said 2Jason. 'Besides, I'm perfectly happy with my height, thank you very much. I'm easy to please.'

'I'm quite sure that you are,' said Mira.

'Anyhow,' said 2Jason, shortly. 'You end up, to all intents and purposes, with a real, live person - and because this *is* real life, it's hardly ever that simple...

'You got the memory-holes and multiple-copy artefacting to start with - and then the process itself gives everything an extra scramble. It's like dealing with a brain-damage case. You need extensive counselling and therapy to take the pieces and fit them all together...'

2Jason nudged at me, making me lurch and almost slip to the floor.

'Chummy here got none of that,' he said. 'When I finally tracked him down, I found that these Manufactory bastards were purposefully halting his personality-integration. They'd stuck him in

an artificial environment designed to arrest his development at. what. 11 years old...'

'Artificial environment?' I chimed in. remembering one of the TV shows I loved. Or remembered. I suppose, having loved. 'What, like a holodeck?'

'Holodeck?' 2Jason looked at me. puzzled. What the *hell* is a holodeck?'

I have to admit. I found it a bit odd that he could have forgotten something so obvious, what with him being me and all. Maybe it was something to do with the holes in his own memory that he had mentioned and then glossed over.

'You know,' I said, obscurely embarrassed for some reason, though whether at 2Jason's lapse, or my own retention of some completely useless and trivial fact, it was impossible to say. Holograms made out of... hard light and stuff. To make environments out of.'

'Hard light and stuff?' 2Jason snorted with contempt. 'Well. I suppose they *could* have rewritten the laws of physics just to stick you in a copy of our old house. On the whole, though, it was probably easier to just make it out of. you know, actual stuff.'

2Jason turned back to Mira. with the general impression that what he was really doing was turning his back on me.

'This is what I have to contend with,' he said. He's engaging with the world on the level of some obnoxious kid, brought up in a world where science might as well be magic. He has no idea what's real and what's not - or what might *seem* real but for the wrong reasons. I'll bet he thinks your psionics work by. I don't know, wibbly life-force energy or some such wank and that you can read minds...'

I wasn't thinking about anything to do with Mira's psionics'. whatever they were, truth be told. For one thing she hadn't actually done anything that suggested she was the telepath she was supposed to be. No moving things by some invisible force, no shimmering out of existence in one place and reappearing somewhere else, and no talking by a sort of echoing voice inside my mind. She'd moved and walked and talked to us. myself and 2Jason. like anybody else.

More importantly, all this talk of my house, the home rd lived in as a child, kept drawing me back into the memories of it.

The life I'd thought was mine and everything I'd known. The disconnect between that and present circumstances had been too profound.

It was as though rd stepped, somehow from my real life into a movie - the life I remembered seemed... well simply more *real*.

I could feel it sucking at me; the sort of totally immersive sense-memory where you don't just remember them but relive them. And if I gave in and let it suck me down then it wouldn't matter if this weird, new, futuristic world was the actual state of things or not.

Whatever the actual physical state of me, I realised, locked immobile in a coma from which I could not be roused, so far as I was concerned I'd be back there in that house.

Stuck there with a father who had beaten me to the point of torture, and who had broken my little sister's fingers just for fun. Stuck with a mother who never seemed to notice except for the times, sometimes, where it seemed like she was actively cheering him on.

And this time there would be no way back to a world that might be 'real' but which I couldn't feel as such. This time there would be no hope in hell.

This time there would, truly, be no way out.

A Past Life: Six

B: You are right, there is a natural law: but it is still more natural to many people to forget it.

A: It is natural also to be one-eyed, hump-backed, lame, deformed, unhealthy: but one prefers people who are well made and healthy.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

'Look, this is silly,' Professor Bernice Summerfield said, after several hours of us sitting side-by-side on acceleration couches and not talking to each other. 'We're stuck here with each other, so we might as well talk to pass the time.'

This was slightly annoying. I thought, since that hadn't been my fault. I'd been perfectly willing to talk to her - it was she who hadn't been talking to me.

'Sure,' I said. Okay. Let's play a game.' I made a little show of peering out of the control cabin canopy. 'I spy with my little eye, something beginning with S. Space. Your go.'

I think, as near as I can recall, I was trying to make a make a small joke to lighten the mood.

If so, it fell completely flat.

'I mean we could just talk,' said Professor Bernice Summerfield,

coldly. 'You know, like tell each other the story of our lives and suchlike.'

'Fine,' I said, shrugging. 'You go first. I'm all ears.'

The life and times of Professor Bernice Summerfield are pretty well known, and pretty well documented in any number of places, so I don't propose to rehash them here. I don't have the time, for one thing, leave alone the number of versions there seem to be of it.

Suffice it to say that she was part of what I gathered was an informal peacekeeping force, or troubleshooting team or what have you, and had been born several centuries in my future.

I do recall that she had a problem with the simple fact that I had no trouble understanding the general concept of time travel. My initial reaction to that was something on the lines of, *I'm from 1996 AD, last time I looked; you're from the Future. Well, duh.*

It would only be later that I realised this was a product of my own ignorance.

I'd been translated from 1996 Earth to what, so far as I was concerned, was the science fiction world of the Dagellan Cluster - so I'd just naturally assumed, in a dumb kind of way, that time travel would be another part of that general science fiction-y stuff somewhere. I was simply unaware of the myriad scientific and technical reasons why time travel in our universe was flatly impossible.

The fact that it actually *does* exist, of course, is neither here nor there.

I also remember that I managed to upset her, and upset her profoundly. It's a knack I seem to have in these things.

She was telling me how she had been born - will have, would have been born - during the third wave of an expansion by an alien race noted for the somewhat unlikely use they made of exomorphic cybernetics. How they had decimated her home planet, killing her mother in the process. How her father had been lost, how she had spent years of her young life trying to find a trace of him to no avail...

And all I could think about was this race as I vaguely knew about them *then* - obnoxious, pushy new kids shoving in out of the back of the beyond (as it was then) and little more than a joke.

I mean, here we are in a self-devastated, post-nuclear-holocaust world (as a lot of them sadly are, as a common factor in hominid-form development) where some pretty drastic measures are gonna be needed to survive. Oh, dear, oh, gosh, whatever shall we do?

I know, let's cut off all our arms and legs, force-mutate the rest into the sort of thing that would be at home in a bubbling tank with HITLER written on it! Then stick it in a robot! Then - and this is the clever bit - make just as sure as dammit that said robot cannot turn around in tight corners! All it's ever going to be doing is *advance*, after all...

No wonder the guys had a total hard-on about the rest of the universe, about people walking around as if they... well, as if they could walk around on real feet.

And so on. And so forth. I cannot believe, here and now, that as I went through this song-and-dance did not realise how much it was upsetting her, this pissing on what was almost certainly one of the most important things in her life, until she lurched from the control cabin and didn't come back for 15 minutes.

I spent those 15 minutes feeling thoroughly ashamed of myself, of course, and I still feel it now. And since it isn't *me* who has anything to be ashamed of, this is one of the things that strike me as not exactly fair.

There are other things. Other things I don't find fair. Oh, yes.

When she came back, it was on the tacit understanding that we'd played All About Benny for as long as human life, so far as it existed in the control cabin, could stand. Or at least, stand without one of it summarily attempting to end the other one. Now it was my turn.

(And it's at this point that I have to make yet another set of qualifications. No, don't thank me, I know how much you love 'em.

I can remember what I said, word for word, and I have real memories attached to what I said, but some of the tags are a bit loose. Like if I talk about cars - I don't think I actually do, come to think of it - I have a sense-memory of riding in the back of one while my father grinds the gearbox and swears, but when I try to remember what a car was, as opposed to the antigrav hov-fliers I know from personal experience, my own mental gearbox seems to freeze up.

*So, like I said, I can remember some of the things I told Benny almost word for word, but some of the words and the concepts behind them, here and now, make no sense to me. I'm gonna leave them in, but I'll mark them with a little star or asterisk, like *this.)*

'How did you get all the way out here?' Benny asked me. 'Out here in the Dagellan Cluster?'

This was, come to think of it, the first time I'd ever heard the Cluster actually named. That name for it, anyway. I said as much.

'I think she was the captain of the first Earth ship to ever reach it,' Benny said.

'Figures.' I locked the helm, set the proximities and tried to work out where to start. I mean, my life was just my life; what real interest would it be to someone who as a matter of course travelled the whole vast panoply of space and time, putting right what once went wrong and stuff like that?

'Pretty ordinary, I suppose,' I said. 'Grew up out in the countryside maybe sixty miles out of London. "Mock Tudor housing estate in one of those "commuter-belt villages where "chartered accountants go to die, you know?'

'Near enough,' said Benny, a little superciliously, I somehow felt. 'I seem to remember the UK nuclear-waste-age demographics. I thought I caught a tang of the nice, white middle-classes under the gutter-argot language rhythms.'

'Yeah, well,' I said, a little annoyed despite myself.

It's one thing to be thoroughly ashamed of making light of someone's life, but we were talking about *my* life now.

'Proper little nuclear family we were,' I continued. 'Mum, my little sister and a father who belted the living crap out of all three of us. So I got out as soon as I could. I mean literally, the instant I was of an age where I could actually abscond rather than, you know, just walk down the road for a bit with a packet of *Razzles in my satchel. Hit the big city...

'For a year or two I did this and that - the usual stuff. Little bit of *Centrepont, little bit of *Mile End stomping, little bit of *smoking out of foil, a bit of feeding the *chickenhawks. Just the usual. None of it really mattered. A few more years and I'd have been able to haul myself out of it or I'd have been dead.

'So, anyway, the years pass. And then one Christmas Eve I'm wandering up from *Piccadilly to the meat-rack arcade in *Oxford Street. I've blown a bunch of wages and most of my emergency stash on a couple of pints in the *Lion and a new leather jacket from the *Zone - special-offer Christmas present to myself, what with winter really starting to bite - and I'm debating whether I look clean and pretty enough in it for a quick and purely social detour to the *Village... The next thing I know, I'm flat on my back in this muddy swamp, with a brain that feels like it's been lightly fried and a bunch of scorch marks across my chest and shins and forearms...

'Now at this point I'm occasionally used to waking up in sudden woodland, after getting what you might call tired and emotional,

wrapped around a tree bole and with no memory of how I actually got there. So I really don't think too much about it...

'Only there's this weird little three-eyed alien *thing* hissing at me, and when I freak out and run it comes after me. And then when I crack my head on a branch of one of the strange and twisty purple overhanging trees, I wake up to find him bouncing up and down on me and gibbering. That was how I met Shug. It isn't much, I suppose, but at least it's a constant. He's always around.'

I looked around for the aforementioned three-eyed little alien thing. As ever, when I actually wanted to see him, he was nowhere to be seen. He had what I can only describe as a 'nest' back in the hold - a twisted-together mess of wires and scavenged components with which he was forever fiddling, like those birds in Africa, or wherever it was, who build these complicated structures to impress potential mates. As, until recently, the only other living person who might ever see it, I can't say it did all that much for me.

'So anyway,' I continued, 'now I'm wandering through the swamp in a kind of daze. I didn't know it at the time, but I suppose I was suffering from profound sensory and psychological overload - everything I saw was entirely different, on a whole new *order* of difference, from anything I'd ever seen. Even the *sky* was different.'

'Xenological Stress Disorder,' Benny said, in what she probably thought was a knowing manner, but which I picked up on as patronising as all get out. 'On the deep subconscious level, you expect a particular value for gravity, a particular planetary albedo, a certain basic shape to the forms of the world - it can hit you hard, the first time you find yourself in an alien environment. That's what alien *means*, of course.'

'Thanks for that,' I said. 'And when you have a spare moment, you should make sure to tell me that pants are supposed to be worn inside the trousers. So, anyway, I push my way through a clump of vegetation... and suddenly I'm on the lip of a vast crater with an alien city in it. Semi-sentient architecture, antigravity fliers, slingshot spaceports and soma shafts, the whole bit.'

'Fortunately, as I later found out, I was on t'Kao which was probably *the* major space-lane crossover planet for that sector. That meant a huge variety of life forms, but it also meant that things as a whole were more generalised and easier to get a handle on. Once I got over the shock and picked up a little of the language it was no worse than those first few months in London. Which isn't all that good an example of things not being horrific, come to think of it.'

'So after what on Earth would be about a year, I hitched a ride on an ore processor launch and I've been wandering ever since. Sometimes up, sometimes down; no big story, you know, no big deal.'

'No big deal?' Benny was looking at me oddly. 'I don't know if you know this, but to find a human this far out, at this point on the timeline, is flatly impossible!'

'Hey, don't look at me,' I said. 'Before it happened, I'd have said finding me on the *Moon* would have been impossible. And then I found myself one hell of a lot further than that, and simply had to deal. Aren't there aliens who abduct humans and do things with probes? Slave-routes and such? Stuff like that would have been kept sort of secret, by the naughty people who were doing it, wouldn't it?'

Benny shook her head. 'Not this far out. The Gray Market doesn't stretch this far. There's nobody who just picks people up and then dumps them, seemingly at random...'

She paused for a moment, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

'What am I saying?' she said. 'Of course there are. There are people who do precisely that.'

'Oh, yes?' I said. This sounded interesting - although *interesting* was probably the wrong word.

It was a bit like finding yourself in the desert or something, wandering around and dying from thirst. Miraculously, you meet up with someone in the same, uh, I want to say 'boat', but you know what I mean. So you travel on together.

And then, at some point, your companion casually says something like, '*Count yourself lucky that you didn't go to that oasis fifty yards away from where you met me. It wasn't a particularly good one; the water was a bit muddy.*'

'Oh, yes?' I said again, attempting to disguise my eagerness with an air of disparagement. 'So tell me, who are these people who go around picking other people up?'

'You're better off not knowing,' said Benny, studding down the subject before it started. 'Believe me, these people can *seriously* screw up your life.'

It would only be later that I would discover just how precisely true that was. And by then, of course, it was far, far too late.

A Second Life: Seven

Your doctor saved your aunt: but assuredly he did nothing that contradict nature's order; he followed it. It is clear that your aunt could not stop herself being born in such and such town, that she could not stop herself having a certain malady at a particular time, that the doctor could not be elsewhere than in the town where he was, that your aunt had to call him, that he had to prescribe for her the drugs which cured her, or which one thinks cured her, when nature was the only doctor.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

'Oops,' said 2Jason, ducking back behind a support stanchion as a blast of flame went by, acetylene-bright and hot enough to have the edge of the steel, honeycombed on a microscopic level for the sake of structural lightness, melting in a charred lacework pattern. 'Who are these guys, anyway?'

'I *told* you,' Mira snapped. 'You - the real you - called me for help. He was in trouble and needed me. And when I picked up on *you* and the danger you were in, I thought that was the trouble he meant!'

For myself, I was too busy dealing with memories that were trying to suck me into catatonia to remember if she'd actually *told* 2Jason

and myself anything or not. I suppose, though, that I should give at least some semblance of explanation, most of which I picked up later and almost none of which I knew at the time.'

There is, of course, no such thing as 'telepathy' - in the sense that I remember from old TV shows and stuff - and everybody knows it. In the same way that there are no such thing as 'aliens', and everyone who was sane on twentieth-century Earth knew that.

In actual fact, there really are things that might be thought of as telepathy and aliens and so forth - *but in a different way*. It's like the difference between believing in some magical cornucopia that will produce a gorgeosity of comestibles on command, and ordering a burger and big chips from a drive-through window.

Mira sported, amongst other things, cyber-modifications that allowed her neurosystem to resonate, by a form of inductance, in tune to that of someone else. In some way that I can't even pretend to understand, to do with quantum entanglement or some such, this process seemed to operate independent of space/time as we know it - allowing her and others like her to conveniently locate another person and tell if they are in danger.

It's like a nagging feeling in the back of the mind that you should be doing something, apparently, like remembering to turn the gas off. An OCD-like mental itch you have to scratch. A source of annoyance as opposed to going anything like, 'We must assist those poor souls, by crikey, for that is the sort of stout heroic people that we are!'

'Human rights activists,' Mira said, now. They're hitting the facility to liberate the human subjects.'

'Human rights?' said 2Jason. 'Doesn't sound too bad.'

'Yeah,' said Mira. 'Only, these are the Church of the Righteously Ascended Pure - and their idea of *human liberation* is to shoot anybody who doesn't measure up in the head and finish them off with a flamethrower.'

We had reached what I could only think of as a 'shuttle bay', but was in fact just the equivalent of something as prosaic as a parking lot. It contained a number of small ships and pods intended, so I gathered, to make the traverse to and from the larger, star-going ships parked out in Nebula space.

It also contained a number of figures in ragged, bloodstained hessian robes and cowls.

In keeping with what Mira had pointed out. they all appeared to be toting either some variety of assault weapon, a flamethrower, or both.

'I thought you were avoiding the danger areas.' said 2lason. 'You know, by picking up on people's minds and stuff.'

'Yes. well,' said Mira. loosing off automatic blaster-fire to dissuade any hostile from coming after us. One bolt hit the fluid-tank or a flamethrower, and a hessian-robed figure went up with a brief shriek and a *whoomph*. 'That rather depends on them having minds.'

'Little bit of politics, there, thank you and good night,' said 2Jason sardonically.

'I wasn't editorialising much,' said Mira. 'Combat-readiness plus fanaticism simplifies the thought-processes to the point where I can't get a proper read. There's simply nothing there that I can run a pattern-recognition on. Psionics just don't help much - that's why the experiment of building combat-models like me ultimately failed.'

'Marvellous,' said 2Jason, dispiritedly.

'I'm still sex and sudden death on legs, though,' said Mira. 'and don't you forget it.'

'So where are we heading for, now, sexy sudden death person with legs?' asked 2Jason.

'The green jump-pod with the wolfshead decals,' said Mira. 'That's the only way to get to the ship. The only way out is through.'

'Is that something you can do?' asked 2Jason. 'In all honesty. I reckon I'd have enough to cope with just looking after...' He turned o look at me and his face fell. 'Oh. damn. The bugger's off again.'

The draw of the memories was overwhelming, obliterating my will to function or move. It was as if I were some animal raised in a cage, paralysed with anxiety about the world outside, because for all its filth and misery the cage was still, in some sense, *safe*...

Now hang on. this is stupid. I thought. Whatever my confusion about the nature of the here and now. I wasn't getting anywhere if I didn't treat it as real. There must be some connection, some order of progression, from the *then* to the now. So. okay. I'm in the house and I'm 11 years old. So what happened after that? And what happened after *that*?

The rush of events hit me like a brick to the back of my head. An almost literal, physical sensation.

It drove me too my knees. I half-expected 2Jason to try and catch me, but he stepped smartly out of the way instead, which was not a little hurtful. Though not as painful as my knees.

I just knelt there, locked immobile, and I remembered...

At the end of the street, I realised the vodka bottle was empty. I also realised that I was feeling the secondary effects of a day and the most part of a night drinking.

Not the dehydration but the reason for it. My bladder was bursting and, somehow, I'd just never got around to bothering to relieve it.

To the extent that I remember thinking anything at all, it was a simple process of putting two and two together. I didn't want to piss up against a wall, on a main road, where even this late at night anybody might come along. But I had an empty bottle. So it seemed like the most simple and obvious thing in the world to unzip my fly, in the middle of the road, and try to use the bottle.

It was one of those things, I suppose, that seem to make perfect sense at the time, and you only realise later how stupid they were. Later, in this case, happened almost immediately and involved a large amount of spray.

It was obviously the fault of the stupid bottle. I dashed it against the wall of someone's garden, then shook my hands in some attempt to get them dry.

I couldn't quite place where I was, just knew I was on the wrong side of town. That wasn't a problem. It was a small town, just a few miles from the village where I'd grown up. I'd grown up and got out - I just hadn't managed to get that far.

The events of the evening were something of a blur. Some pub or other, and then being shoved out of the line for a club 'cause of the half-bottle I was trying to take in to save money, and after that... not so much a blank, but a kind of confused fast-forward. A sense-memory of smacking into a pavement after tripping on the curb, black grit jamming into my hands.

Most of my life was a blur, come to think of it, after that night when Everything Changed.

After that night, after my father had gone for my mother with a rolled-up newspaper of all things, and I had somehow managed to get in the way and I had picked up the kitchen knife... that was when it started. Before that, if I'd wanted to, I could have taken everything in my life and made a kind of sharp, clear picture. Afterwards things fell apart and stopped fully making sense.

A confusion of being taken to the family solicitor and then being allowed to stay at home for months instead of having to go to school. And then the remand centre, and smacking that queer who had come into my room, there, and had tried it on.

That had been, in some way that I didn't fully understand,

somehow *worse* than what I had done to my father, the reason I was in there in the first place. The fog of years descended. The events of them might have made sense, I supposed, some through-line logic, if it wasn't for the drink.

I'd remember perfectly, if it wasn't for the drink. That was why I drank.

Now, here and now, the night chill seeped into the back of my neck, bringing with it an entirely different kind of clarity. The kind where you can focus on specific events, what was done and what was said, but in a desiccated and emotionless kind of way, no feelings attached.

I thought of a girl. I can't remember what her name was. It's just a blank in my mind with a kind of clinical little tag: The Girl I Loved. It was nothing more than a simple identifier, with no connotations either way.

I'd met her after coming out of the remand centre. Clumsy fumbling and even clumsier sex in an alley out the back of a club and then, somehow, we'd stuck together. She seemed to know what I meant to say to her, even when I didn't know how to say it, and it was maybe as simple as that.

Even when I'd had to smack her, she knew it was because it was how I felt, and that it wasn't her fault, and that it was nothing really to do with her. And I hadn't done it much. And I *hadn't* really hurt her. I *knew* what actual hurting felt like, and it hadn't been like that. It hadn't felt like that at all.

And then one day I'd looked around the room we rented, looked at all the stuff she'd left, and realised that she would never even be coming back for it. And I finally realised the truth of how I had acted, what I had done, what I had thrown away.

If I could have seen her again, even once, I'd have been able to explain. She would have seen. She would have given me a second chance.

Of course, it wasn't as if I didn't know where she was living, now. I'd known that for weeks.

She was still in town, though on the other side of it from me - on the road that, it finally occurred to me, I was on here and now.

A Past Life: Seven

It seems that God has put truth in your ears, and error in your eyes; but study optics, and you will see that God has not deceived you, and that it is impossible for objects to appear to you otherwise than you see them in the present state of things.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

The mechanic looked at the HyperDyne unit with an air of general despondency and woe.

It was by no stretch of the imagination humanoid (the mechanic, that is, not the HyperDyne unit) but it managed to click its mandibles together in a tut-tut-tutting manner that I instantly translated as, 'Oh, dear me, squire, this is going to cost you.'

In a universe where the spaces between the stars can be traversed by anything from Quantum Pocket Extrapolators to Hyper-wobble Cheese Drives, or ships powered by pure belief, or sexual chemistry, or sheer collective panic that they won't work, the principles operating the HyperDyne unit are neither here nor there.

All you need to know is that it was a small but important component of the drive-system, in the same way that a thin strip of double-seamed cloth is an important component in stopping the arse falling out of your trousers.

When it goes, you'd better stop and do something about it quick.

Fortunately, we had been within limping distance of the planet Makrath when the unit had given out. Makrath was slightly more developed than a *one-fupi* rock like Jaris; there was the possibility of making some actual money. So I signed the indemnity form on the mechanic's pad, with only near-debilitating qualms, despite the fact that defaulting would mean the loss of several major internal organs. Liquefied and through a straw.

Bernice Summerfield was standing on the ship's access gantry, looking out at the bustling Makrath port head with a general attitude of 'seen better'. She turned to look at me, when I clambered up, with an attitude of 'seen better on the sole of my shoe'.

'Any luck?' she said.

'Sorted.' I shrugged. 'Don't worry about it.'

I went into the ship, with Benny trailing behind me, and started pulling a number of small but useful items from a storage locker.

'What's that?' Benny asked, pointing to one of said useful items. 'Looks like a miniature supercomputer, designed to strap round the waist and plug into a set of goggles...'

'And that's exactly what it is,' I said, strapping the thing around my waist, pulling my jacket over it and slipping the goggles into a pocket.

Makrath wasn't exactly New New Old New Little Old Nova New Las Vegas - for one thing, it would take another half-millennium and massive human expansion into the stars to make a name like New New Old New Little Old Nova New Las Vegas meaningful in the first place.

What it did have was a tourist-trade, and local laws that made it into what passed, in the Cluster, as a centre of gambling.

This I explained to Benny as we headed through the tourist-quarter of the spaceport hinterlands and fetched up outside of a large establishment looking something like a massive beached octopod lacquered with porphyry, gold-leaf and jade. From within came the happy sound of people occasionally gaining, but mostly losing, reasonable-sized fortunes on a minute-by-minute basis.

'Come on,' I said to Benny. 'Let's make some money.'

With Benny once more trailing behind, I strolled nonchalantly into the splendour of the gaming house. Whereupon we were immediately set upon by big alien bouncers, who ran detectors over us and then frog-marched (they were decidedly anural in form, those bouncers) into a small and somewhat shabbily appointed back room.

It was the sort of room, naturally, where the only way out was through the crack in the bottom of the door. Possibly with the aid of a straw.

'So just what,' said Benny, a couple of hours later, 'was all *that* about?'

We were in a nearby bar, drinking a non-alcoholic oogli-fruit concoction as a small reward. *Non-alcoholic* in the sense that almost any form of detection would show it as such, on account of having been overloaded.

Money had been made and all was right with the world - at least, all the things that were wrong with it had been cushioned a little by having a bit of money.

'Places like Makrath,' I explained, 'are owned by the seriously big boys. There's no way you can win, without cheating, and anybody who apparently does is on a salary. Likewise they've got the service industries totally sewn up; you try dealing or hustling, as such, and they cut you off at the knees, or the elbows, or wherever else might be applicable.

'On the other hand, you can pick up a little freelance work by taking something to them - the specs for a fab new space drug, say, or the latest variation on a foolproof winning system. Me, I have a small knack for these little electromechanical cheats. It probably comes from remembering a bit of how electronics worked on Earth and putting it together with the available technology here.'

Benny looked at me dubiously - and I have to admit that it annoyed me. I've been getting that look, it seems to me, all my life. Well, my life as I remember it, you know what I mean.

You're some relic from humanity's past, the look says. From a time when man had barely broken atmosphere. So why aren't you forever looking at all this boffo new technology that we have these days, going 'Ug!' and scampering off to a cave and sticking a lump of knapped flint up your nose and the suchlike?

To which I can only reply: stop being a tosser and *think* about it for a minute. It's not hard.

I never had the chance to drive a car, for example, what with being taken from Planet Earth before the age where people would let me without nicking one. (I keep coming back to *cars*, for some reason; I have no idea why.) That doesn't mean I wouldn't have learned how to drive one if I'd got to the age where I could.

You might as well say that a newborn baby will never learn about

anything, ever, because it starts out utterly ignorant of the world. Star-jump technology, transputronic AI protocols and all the rest of it was what there was to be learned, and so I learnt it. I learnt it the hard way. And it seems unfair that people keep looking at me as if I haven't.

(Especially since, here and now, it seems that quite a lot of all the stuff I learnt the hard way has been summarily wiped. I've been going on a bit about the unfairness of it all, I know, I know... but that's because there's something coming up, very soon now, which strikes me as the most unfair thing of all. Very soon, now, it's coming up. Honestly. I mean, would I lie to you?)

Benny took another pull on her drink. We were both, I'll admit, pretty much the worse for it by now.

'I thought you were going to try to, try to, try to... win, that's what I thought you were trying to go to do...'

'That's the clever bit,' I said, a little more lucidly - at least, that's my story and I'm sticking to it. Take that little dice-predicting thing I built. Now they're going to copy it and sell it through various blind channels to every sorry loser in the Cluster who wants to change his luck. Meanwhile it's now useless, and by the time the sorry losers learn it they've lost the lot and are jumping out of airlocks on broken legs. Everybody who matters is happy - and the big boys tend to keep the people who can come up with stuff they can use like that alive.'

Benny looked at me. 'You really are shameless, aren't you? You have no shame.'

'Yeah, well,' I said. 'You can't eat shame.'

And it's at this point that we come to the Most Unfair Thing of All. You can talk about things being unfair, or doubly unfair... but this, so far as I'm concerned, is an 'I know you are but what am I' brand of unfairness. A Same to You with Brass Knobs on and Sugar on top Times a Million that goes all the way up to Infinity.

(I'm not talking about the odd backhander. I mean the real number. Sustained and ritualised and believe me you don't forget it. You wish you could. It's inside you all the time and it never stops.

The guy had all these little ritual systems of crime and punishment, and he'd go through them, really cold, like it was more in sorrow than in anger, you know? You could work out a kind of crazy logic to them afterwards, but you could never see them coming up...

'There was one time, right. Every day, at the same time, he told my little

sister Lucy that he had seen her touching herself in a bad place or something and that she was going to be corrected.

'Lucy's something like six; she hasn't got a clue what he's talking about - but she knows him. We're terrified, but nothing happens for days. Weeks. It just became routine...')

Now I've mentioned that we were drinking, me and Benny, and that we were the worse for it. Now anybody reading this, if anybody, will no doubt be going oh-ho, here's the age-old excuse for not being able to remember the unpalatable details of what the feller might have done or said while under the influence.

(... 'and then the school holidays started. He has more time to play about with before people have to see her. Over three days, once a day, at the exact same time every day, he breaks one of her fingers. Pops the joints with a mallet and a chisel with the cutting edge blunted with masking tape.

He does it late in the evening just in case his train home from work's delayed. The fact that it's always at the same time was part of it. He does it very carefully and he makes her keep ice packs on them - and pops the last one as an afterthought, so when he finally takes her to casualty he can get away with saying he slammed the car door on them...')

Really, I mean (you may continue) what is it with you people who think you can just wing it on ethanol and amphetamines and think it'll make some kind of ultimate mnemonic sense? Stick a nice cup of tea and a Madeleine in your gob, is my advice to you...

('I suppose if we were living in some scummy urban housing estate we'd have had the social services spilling out of our ears the first time I fell down the stairs. But we were nice and white and middle class - and the nice, white middle classes aren't supposed to do stuff like that. The mechanisms to detect and deal with it weren't in place.

'The worst thing was Mum. I mean, okay, she was getting her share and she was like permanently shell-shocked and when you come down to it what could she do, right?

'When you're a kid she's one of the two most powerful people in the world, like a goddess or something, and when she doesn't save you and even covers up for him it's like she's collaborating. The guy was a bastard and f--- him, but with your mum it's like love and hate mixed up inside you, yeah?

And then of course, sometimes, he'd just totally lose it. In the end he went for my mother with a newspaper. It wasn't like I tried to stop him or anything. I was just in the way and...')

Anyhow.

The drink didn't stop me from remembering things. I only wish it

had. I remember getting somewhat more maudlin than otherwise, in my cups, and telling Benny more of my life before I was taken from Earth. About my life at home. About the systematic campaign of sadism and violence perpetrated upon me and my young sister by our father...

('... roll it really tight, it's like a punching weapon. Do it right and you can punch it through a plank. It's like a trick to deal with muggers and he'd carry one whenever he went to work and came back - like he was going to get mugged between Liverpool Street station and Bank.

'So anyway, that night I looked at my face in the mirror and felt the soft bits in my side and looked down into the blood in the toilet and that was it. I suppose I could have stuck the bastard with a kitchen knife and buried him under the patio or something, but I just walked out of the house, walked five miles to the nearest town and hopped the last train of the night.

'I didn't even pack. I left mum and little Lucy with him. I shouldn't have done that. I should have looked out for her. I was nearly 13, she was only coming up to nine...')

Oh, yes, you'd better believe that I remember. I can only hope and pray, to whatever gods that might be out there, that the time will come when I don't *relive* it when remembering.

('Hey, don't worry about it. You weren't to know.')

I remember telling Benny certain things, reliving them as I told her in quite nauseating detail, and then...

I woke up, with a splitting hangover, in some seedy Makrath boarding house, in a bed, which had been recently and quite extensively used. Benny was there too.

My first feeling was of utter, almost transubstantive joy, a relief from some inner sense of pain and loss that I had previously not been aware of, for the simple reason that I had been carrying around with me for years, and was only aware of now that it was gone. A moment of perfect peace.

And this, of course, lasted about half a second, before the sheer weight of reality hit.

This was not how the world worked. This was going to be taken away from me, as everything else in my life had been taken, and there would be nothing I could do about it.

Benny was bustling about, picking up her clothes and jetting into them in a jerky way. Uncoordinated with anger. I steeled myself for the worst before I looked her in the face - I mean, the reality couldn't be worse than I imagined if I imagined the worst, right?

She looked back at me like I was an insect. A six-foot insect who had somehow inveigled her participation in the worst mistake she had ever made in her life. With its ghastly feelers and clicky little mandibles, I have no doubt. I can still remember what the pain in my jaw felt like.

If she'd said a word, a single word, I would have launched myself from the bed, like as not tangling myself up in the sheets in an appropriately humorous manner, and the words would have fallen over themselves as I prostrated myself face-flat on the floor...

A contemptuous little sneer twitched at her mouth and then, without a word, she turned her back on me and walked out.

And you see what happened, here? Those memories weren't blurred by drink or artefacting. Those memories were cut from the start.

Oh, yes, I get the recollected pain and misery leading up to them, the emotional legacy of the fallout. But do I get the act itself, or - and far more importantly - a whiff of anything that I might have said or done to make it possible in the first place? Do I bollocks.

Thank you, the original Jason Peter bloody Kane. Thank you so bloody much. I hope you die. Sooner rather than later would be good.

A Second Life: Eight

A judge who would condemn a man who has killed his assassin, because homicide is forbidden, would be as iniquitous as he was poor reasoner.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

'Up, you silly sod!' 2Jason shouted. 'On your feet!'

I did as I was told, operating on automatic; it was simply easier to do what somebody told me to do than not.

'Is he going to be okay?' said Mira dubiously. 'You realise, yeah, he goes down in the middle of this and I'll leave you both behind?'

'No problems,' 2Jason lied sincerely, knowing that nobody was going to be buying this putative lack of problematical matter for a second. He said it again: 'No problems. Let's go.'

I was looking at Mira because she happened to be in my line of sight, so I saw her posture change. She just stood there for a moment, but accelerated, as though shot standing still by stop-motion.

And then she was gone.

I'd learnt where the Girl I Loved was living through the simple expedient of hanging around the bars we'd gone to and the club in

which we'd met, listening in on the talk from people who had been her friends and never mine.

It was during one such conversation that I caught the word *refuge*.

This had alarmed me. I'd just assumed, without thinking much about it, that the Girl I Loved would have gone back to stay with her family or something like that. I knew she had a proper family, unlike me, though I hadn't really met them.

The thing was, in a town as small as this, there was only one place that could be called a battered woman's refuge. It was run by a couple of women, commonly thought to be lesbians, who had moved down from London bringing their big city Trotskyite ways with them.

It wasn't exactly official, but the social services had been known to refer people there because it was, basically, the only game in town.

I remembered that my mother had taken me there one afternoon, once. We hadn't stayed and, being a little kid, I can't remember why. Maybe she simply lost her nerve.

Here and now, standing outside, I tried to work out what to do. The drink was wearing off and, combined with the cold, I had a splitting ache in the back of my skull.

Maybe the Girl I Loved was in there, or maybe I'd got the wrong end of the stick. Maybe she'd let me talk to her and try to explain things, maybe not. Either way, I supposed, it couldn't hurt to see. It couldn't hurt anything at all.

'Pick up those feet!' Jason snapped at me. 'One foot in front of the other! Move!'

Ahead of us, an accelerated Mira tore through the hessian-clad figures like, well, bags of meat in rotten sacking. There was something mind-jammingly wrong about this: the human form was simply never meant to move this fast.

'Die, foul abomination in the sight of the - *glurk!*' cried some worthy member of the Church of the Righteously Ascended Pure as he went down. His hood fell back and I caught a glimpse of a pasty-white face with the sloping forehead, fleshy jowls and receding chin that seem strangely common to those forever banging on about biological purity.

I lurched forward because somebody had told me to do it, not particularly caring what was catching on my feet, another wave of memory washing over me...

The bell by the door was of an old type, like half a marble in a metal flange. When I pressed it, I thought I heard a mechanical clacking somewhere deep inside the house, but I couldn't be sure, so I knocked.

Nothing seemed to be happening in response, so I knocked harder. A splinter from the frame buried itself in one of my knuckles. I swore, and started kicking at the door, feeling with a kind of vague satisfaction that it gave a little, at the lower right-hand corner with every kick.

Suddenly, the door was wrenched back, light from within momentarily dazzling me. A menacing, bulky figure loomed before me, shouting, 'It's three in the bloody morning! I've called the...'

I struck out, blindly and unthinking, smacking the figure full in the face and it went down as though pole-axed.

Looking down, I recognised it: it was the woman who had once given me a sort of lemonade she had made herself, and which tasted more like lemon squash than lemonade, and had seemed, to a little kid, like an amiable giant.

She was older now and actually shorter than I was - she'd only seemed like a giant, now, because I had moved back off the doorstep.

The house had shrunk and been redecorated since the one time I had seen it. I charged up the stairs shouting a name I cannot now recall.

Possibly, it was something that I couldn't consciously recognise like her smell, or maybe there was some actual but intangible bond between us. Either way, I simply *knew* where the Girl I Loved would be. I went past two doors without even looking at them, kicked open the third.

Sense-memory time:

She was there, wearing nothing but a large, loose T-shirt with the word BOBOX printed on it in blocky letters; caught at a shocked, stricken point between coming to see what the noise was about and cowering back in fright.

Defensively, in her left hand (she was left-handed) she gripped a half-full glass bottle of mineral water, bottom outwards so that she could use it as a club if needs be.

I looked at her as if in revelation. She had never told me. She had never told me and I had the *right* to know...

In that instant I stopped thinking. All I could do was feel. I hurt so much that all I could do was show how *much* I hurt.

The bottle glanced off my shoulder, but I hardly felt it. I was too

busy driving my fist, with all my weight behind it, into the slight but obvious bulge of her belly that had hurt me the most.

'Oh, God...' I said, stopping dead while fire and blood rained around me. 'Oh, God, it's...'

'What the hell are you doing?' 2Jason snapped, giving me a shake. 'Get moving!'

I just stood there. I had, quite simply, lost the will to so much as basically function, let alone live - and if that sounds overly dramatic, well, then, I can't help it. Whatever the objective status of these memories, they were a part of me. They were mine. They were who I was.

And I knew with absolute certainty: I couldn't bear to live like that.

'You go on,' I said. 'Just leave me.'

I suppose I could have come out with something that sounded less heroically clichéd, but I just couldn't be bothered. There was no point. There was no point to anything.

'Bugger that!' 2Jason said. He attempted to hustle me along with him, then stopped and looked around worriedly. 'Oh. And whoops.'

The members of the Church of the Righteously Ascended Pure, those who had survived Mira going through them, had regrouped and were now coming for us.

Ahead of us, Mira was already pulling open the hatch of the small, green transport-pod she had talked of earlier. And of course, as she had also talked of earlier, she was now just going to leave us. I didn't care either way.

2Jason, however, ever the optimist, waved at her. 'Uh... little help?'

For a moment she just looked at us. Then the look became a glare and a scowl, indicating the sort of mood that I gather, on GalNet text-chat boards, is denoted by the acronym OFFS.

Anybody expecting a really stonking and dramatic fight-and-rescue scene at this point, incidentally, will be sorely disappointed. Bit of a blow, I know, but take it from me. If you have the choice, in life, between a hugely exciting and spectacular action-scene or not - then a hugely exciting and spectacular action-scene can just go stuff it.

Life, as people are forever mentioning, is too short. What sort of idiot would actually want to go around *making* it shorter, what with all the hugely exciting and spectacular action-scenes and all.

Hugely exciting and spectacular action-scene. I'll keep saying it, I really will, until you stop wanting one.

Anyhow.

When they saw that she was coming back, the surviving members of the Church of the Righteously Ascended Pure very sensibly turned tail and ran. Off to join their comrades in the facility, and take things out on somewhat more defenceless abominations in the sight of God, I have no doubt.

Mira and 2Jason bundled me into the pod, and we took off, heading through the force bubble that kept the bay pressurised. If you've seen the GalactoGraphic shots of the Catan Nebula then you'll know how impressive, for a first time, it was.

I was in no state to appreciate it. 2Jason, however, stared through the canopy with a sense of wonder that might have been a little surprising, if I could have brought myself to care.

'Cor!' he said, genuinely impressed. 'Is that a General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette, as I live and breathe?'

'Yes, well,' said Mira, a little wearily for some reason. 'There was nothing better to hand so I had to make do.'

A Past Life: Eight

Self-esteem is the instrument of our conservation: it resembles the instrument of the perpetuity of the Species: it is necessary, it is dear to us. it gives us pleasure, and it has to be hidden.

- Voltaire. *The Philosophical Dictionary*

I vented the retros and settled on the Kalas landing field - what was left of it. anyway. Originally little more than a clearing cut from the fungus-jungle cover, it seemed disused and now mostly overgrown.

I heaved a small sigh of relief that was only partly to do with the fact of a ship held together with spit and string, equalised the pressure levels, discharged the electrostatics and shut down the engines. Coming down had been a nightmare of juggling the readings of a couple of ancient and malfunctioning automatic radio beacons. It would have been a problem for a ship far better equipped and appointed than mine.

I was feeling a little proud of myself. We'd come in through the perimeter of Dakhaari space on silent running, the active optics and the clockworks turned off. avoiding the warships that patrolled the spatial edge and flying by naked eye. Bit of a flashy piece of piloting, even though I say it myself.

Benny hadn't seen it. of course. She hadn't been there, in the

control cabin. Ever since Makrath she had made a point of never occupying the same cabin space as myself.

It was amazing how she did it, really. I knew she was aboard, somewhere, but I never, ever quite managed to come across her. I ran into Shug more often, scuttling around, like as not with some small but vital component for that bloody nest of his.

Now I went aft and rapped on the hatch leading to what had once been my own sleeping quarters.

'We're here,' I said.

After a while Benny appeared, wearing the torn and roughly repaired clothes she had stood up in when I'd first met her.

'You should be able to find something going on from here,' I told her. When and how, given the state of the landing field, the gods only knew. I just wanted her gone. 'Maybe you should take something to eat, some water maybe.'

'I shall be perfectly all right as I am,' said Benny coolly. 'Thank you very much.'

'Suit yourself.' I hit the airlock control and the hatch *whuffed* open.

Smells tend to trigger the mental processes in a stronger way than other sensations, I think, and the landing strip *smelled* derelict and deserted. Leaving Benny here was suddenly a lot more like stranding her.

'Hey, listen,' I said, biting the bullet, 'maybe we should at least *talk* about, you know, what happened...'

Benny looked at me. Six-foot insect time again.

'About what?' she said, coldly. 'It didn't happen. It wasn't me. I don't do that. It was an aberration and it didn't happen.'

Sod her, then.

'Okay, fine,' I said.

'Fine,' said Benny.

'Well, take care then,' I said. 'Be lucky.'

'And you,' said Benny. 'You take care, too.'

After she had left me in the boarding house, I don't remember feeling or thinking very much. I don't think that's artefacting or mnemonic jiggery-pokery, I think that Jason - the original Jason - was just numb.

I climbed out of bed, climbed into my clothes, climbed down the ramps and got my deposit back from the reception desk, to add to the funds saved against the mechanic's bill and keeping my internal organs where I liked them.

Benny had been waiting for me outside of the ship, when I got back to it. Obviously, there had been no other berths available on ships headed where she wanted to go. She must have tried, but I don't remember her ever mentioning it, then or any time later.

For myself, I don't recall caring one way or another, except in the sense that a deal was a deal and, what the hell, there was nowhere else I had to go or anything else I had to do.

(And can I just say: gawd, Original Jason - living in denial, much?)

Now, I checked through the canopy that she was a safe distance away, heading purposefully towards a collection of adobe huts on one side of the clearing without so much as a backward glance.

When she was fully out of range I dusted off. Broke atmosphere. Lay there strapped to the acceleration-couch for a while.

'Good riddance,' I muttered to myself. 'You're well out of it, boy.'

Yet there was something I'd forgotten to do. Something important. Cut in the artificial gravity? No, it wasn't that - but it reminded me to cut in the a/grav anyway.

I flipped the toggle, and nothing whatsoever happened. Typical. Story of my life. Or someone else's, anyway.

The a/grav unit might just have given up the ghost, of course, but I knew from somewhat bitter experience that there might be another explanation. I unstrapped myself from the couch and hauled myself, hand over hand, back through the ship to the cargo bay where Shug had built his damn nest.

He was squirrelling around it when I arrived, doing God knew what alien thing. Not for the first time, I was struck by the complexity of it, the sense of apparent design. Stick a couple of volts through it, I thought, and you could probably pick up Radio Next Galaxy But One.

And, because it wasn't the first time I'd been struck, especially by a mouth full of teeth like needles, I pulled on a pair of heavy work gloves before rummaging through the nest in search of something that might be used to make the a/grav unit go.

Shug launched himself at me, and buried his needle-teeth into the glove, hard enough to pierce the fingers under it. I managed to shake the little bugger off, and watched with interest as the small furry form smacked into a bulkhead and ricocheted off to hide somewhere in the back of the hold.

What possible reason could there be, I thought, taking off the gloves and sucking on my fingers, for keeping something around that clearly detested me...?

. . .

I barrelled back in through the Kalas atmosphere, alight with... well, you couldn't call it 'heroism', but at least you could call it manly purpose. I'd remembered the thing I'd forgotten, you see - the thing that, once recalled, you cannot believe that you ever forgot in the first place.

The thing that makes life worth living.

As I made the landing field again, I cut in the sensors and the external minicams with a purposeful hand. The idea that you can sense and identify a particular life form from the air is total toss, of course, but the pattern-recognition systems let you pick out any anomaly, and for the most part that works just as well.

The result was... it was certainly anomalous. The smoking wreckage of a crashed ship. A little dot that could only have been Benny - what were the chances that it wasn't? - running and dodging from several larger dots that, even at altitude, gave off sporadic, fiery flashes and a metallic sheen.

I zoomed in on the pursuers. Mechanical automata, twice the size of a human man, if the comparative pattern-recognition was any judge. There was something lurching and shambolic to their gait, possibly as a result of surviving the crash of their ship, but they covered the ground fast for all of that. And the beams from their blaster-arrays covered the ground even faster than that - like at the speed of light.

This was a time for bold, decisive action. This was not a time to mess about with finesse.

This was, in short, a time to drop out of the air and land a big ship on top of a bunch of alien automata.

There now follows a small incident of which I'm honestly not sure what to think. I mention this because, I'm sure, you've just been sitting there and waiting for another bit where I bang on about how confused I am about things, and never seem to know what's going on. This is one of them there they. You have been warned.

I don't know whether it's down to pixilated memory, the Original Jason being as confused as to what was going on as I was, or whether it's one of those things that would have anyone drawing on the fag, knocking back the absinthe and exclaiming with somewhat gravely exasperation, 'Ah, woman, what is it that she wants?'

I mean, I probably saved Benny's life and all, what with landing a bloody great ship on the automatical things that were after her, but I was completely and utterly unprepared, on shooting the hatch and

clambering out, for her to pick herself up from where she'd been knocked over from the concussion, run straight over and hug me like her life depended on it.

I later gathered that she had thought that the crashed ship, the ship from which the automaton monstrosities had come, had been mine, and had been momentarily under the impression that I had burnt to death.

Even so, the sudden change from Insect Time was a bit surprising. At least I remember how it felt. It felt nice.

Abruptly, and all too soon so far as I was concerned, she broke the hug and stood back, looking down at her boots as if unsure what to do next.

'Those things,' I said, meaning the automaton monstrosities and gesturing vaguely back to the ship under which they lay. 'What were they?'

'What?' said Benny, banging at a temporarily landing-concussion-deafened ear with the heel of her hand. 'Beg pardon?'

'Those robot things!' I shouted. 'That's what *automaton* means! What are they? Where did they come from?'

'Oh, I suspect they've been following us for quite some time, now,' said Benny, darkly. 'And I'll just bet there are more of them on the way...'

This did not sound good. 'That happens a lot to you, does it?' I said.

'Pardon?' said Benny.

'That happens a lot?' I shouted.

'Only all the time,' said Benny. 'Evil cyborganic things from the Goddess only knows where, coming after you inexorably with a clicking and ticking of their horrible tungsten claws... goes with the territory, really. Sort of an occupational hazard.'

'Lovely,' I said.

'What?' said Benny.

She shook her head to clear it. That doesn't do any good, but I'm convinced that I actually heard a couple of eardrums pop.

'Anyway,' she continued, in a slightly more pointed manner. 'What are *you* doing back here? I thought you'd decided you were well out of it.'

'Yeah, well,' I said, recalling my sense of firm and manly purpose. 'I just remembered. You said you'd pay me - and you never bloody did.'

A Second Life: Nine

Friendship is the marriage of the soul; and this marriage is subject to divorce. It is a tacit contract between two sensitive and virtuous persons. I say 'sensitive', because a monk, a recluse can be not wicked and live without knowing what friendship is. I say 'virtuous', because the wicked have only accomplices; voluptuaries have companions in debauch, self-seekers have partners, politicians get partisans; the generality of idle men have attachments; princes have courtiers; virtuous men alone have friends. Cethegus was the accomplice of Catilina, and Maecenas the courtier of Octavius; but Cicero was the friend of Atticus.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

Through the canopy of the pod, against the swirling and accretive chaos of the Nebula, the General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette looked like every childhood dream of a killer star ship.

A *deadly* killer star ship. It was surrounded by the debris of other ships, which had been disabled with the space going equivalent of keel-spiking, but the Church of the Righteously Ascended Pure had obviously looked at the General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-

spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette, and checked out its security, and decided to leave well enough alone.

The General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette, in fact, I later gathered, was widely regarded as the epitome of the shipbuilder's art, the most beautiful ship of its type ever built. Especially the model with the dorsal exchange-vents, of which this General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette had three. I was in no state to care about any of this, locked as I was in my own private misery. Left to my own devices, and if I'd had the slightest idea of how to pilot a shuttle-pod, I would have set a course for the heart of the nearest sun. Even here and now, I vaguely supposed, it might be possible to get at the controls and mess with them, to set us all adrift until the air ran out...

'Don't even think about it, chum,' said 2Jason.

The shuttle-pod docked, and 2Jason hauled me into the ship, into a small spare cabin that could serve as living quarters.

'Fire up your psionics,' he said to Mira. 'We have problems.'

I found it hard to imagine what problems he had, compared to mine. If he had the memories I had, he'd have wanted to die. So he didn't have them - or if he did, and he could still function, then he *deserved* to die.

'Can you see it?' he asked Mira.

She nodded. 'I can see it. We have a mnemonic bomb.'

'Thought so.' He stuck his face close to mine. 'Tell me about it. Tell me what you remember.'

It was easier just to do what someone told me than not. Haltingly, I told him about what had happened when I was grown up, about the Girl I Loved, and what I had done.

'Sloppy work.' Mira snorted. 'I can spot at least three major inconsistencies without even trying.'

'Well, we shall leave that as a mental exercise for the audience,' said 2Jason. He put his face close to mine again. 'You have no idea what a mnemonic bomb is, do you? Tell me, these memories of yours - you tried to think of them, right, and the moment you thought of them it was like hurtling towards them on a rail?'

That was one way of putting what it had felt like, and I said so.

'That's because a fast-track was laid to them. They're a construct, cobbled together out of some random extrapolation of your time line. God knows, as I remember it, there's been enough messing around with the original guy's time line to come up with the material.'

'The thing you have to remember,' 2Jason continued in my face, is that it simply *never happened*. I'm not talking about the person you think you are or the body you're in - it never happened at all.'

'Take it from me,' said Mira. 'I can see the shape of it inside you. It's artificially generated.'

'I reckon those bastards in the Manufactory were prepping you for the humanoid slave trade,' said 2Jason. 'Arresting your development, and if you start to wonder about it, then memory-bomb triggers - leaving you feeling all utterly worthless and compliant.'

This seemed an attractive prospect, I'll admit, in the way that self-delusion so often does.

'It's part of me,' I managed. 'It seems so real...'

2Jason snorted. That's 'cos you have nothing with which to compare it.' He paused, briefly, in thought. 'Listen, how old were you, precisely, when all of this was supposed to be happening?'

'I... don't know.' I said. 'In my twenties. TWenty-one?'

'So think about it. Your twenty-first birthday, where were you and what were you doing?'

(A sense-memory flash: 'Here's to me!' I was shouting, in a dark and smoky bar, while assorted alien monstrosities looked on in alarm. 'Twenty-one years old, key to the hab-hatch and I can now legally do what... can't think of the actual things you allowed to do at 21, come to think of it, and you probably wouldn't be able to get any of them here...')

'It's not as real,' I managed. 'Doesn't seem as if it really happened...'

'That's 'cos true memory is like an interconnected totality of half-remembered scraps,' said 2Jason, who obviously enjoyed the more than occasional sojourn in the polysyllabic. He liked long words. 'Of *course* a solid and self-contained construct is going to seem more real.'

He sighed, evidently coming to a decision.

'I really didn't want to do this until you were more prepared, until you were ready, but what the hell. Tell me, does the name Benny mean anything to you? Benny Summerfield? Professor Bernice Summerfield?'

If the memory-cascades I'd felt before had been waves washing over me, this was a full-scale tsunami. Something of a different order of magnitude entirely, of such force that it could smash you to a bloody stain.

Professor Bernice Surprise Summerfield, who liked to lie flagrantly about

things, even though anybody who mattered knew the truth, because that was after all one meaning of the word professor... a couple of cops who took their jobs seriously, and took them wherever they happened to be... some bloody cat or other... a little man with a plan and a Panama hat... sloathe-spawn slipping through the cracks in the walls, mimetic... a son and a daughter and all potential for them lost in a sudden and utterly pointless continuity-collapse... and why I was sent to Hell and never crawled out of it... a divorce from the reality of the way things were supposed to be... the Collection of a man that was, in some sense, bigger on the inside than the out, to hold all its wonders, his wonders to perform... some other bloody cat... What I did by way of Occupation on my Holidays... the right purty Glitta Bitches, and very nice too... the acquisition and the disposition of any number of artifacts and totems and the general whatnot that artefacts and totems attend... Dr Gaylord P. Demento and his nemesis of nemisisememisis... the sacrifice of what was, at the hands of one who thought what ought to be, laid out on the stone of bare expediency... yet another bloody cat... and there's a horse under the wall and the snipping off of tails with shears and...

I was shaking as each fragmented memory hit me like a physical blow, fast as machine-gun fire and, if such a thing were possible, speeding up.

'Can't...' I stuttered, teeth chattering, 'I can't, it's just too much, it...'

'Snap out of it,' 2Jason yelled.

'... can't...'

'Well, you're no use like this. Mira? Do you have anything you can, you know, write on or something? Anything that we can use.'

Mira stuck a hand into a belt pack, and brought out a sleek-looking data pad about a centimetre thick and the size of my palm.

'Hang on,' she said, tapping at the faintly glowing screen-surface. 'Let me back up my, uh, personal stuff off-site and delete it. There. Here you go...'

She tossed the pad to 2Jason, who passed it on to me.

'You're going to be no use until you get your mind in order,' he said. 'And I've found that the best way to do that is to write things down.' He shrugged 'Well, I remember finding that, from the memories I've retained. I don't think I've ever actually done it myself. Never had the urge. Sounds like a hugely boring and pointless thing to do, in the end, if you ask me...'

'You're making it sound more attractive by the second,' I said.

'There you go,' 2Jason grinned. 'You're looking more like your old

self already, what with the descent into the lowest form of wit and all. Just start somewhere, anywhere, and put down what you remember about it and where it leads. Think of it as a school project or something. The Most Important Thing that ever Happened to Me.

'I suppose it couldn't hurt,' I said.

And that, of course, in the bits I've tagged *A Past Life*. is what I've tried to do.

There were two doctor jokes that had stayed with Jason through his life - well, his remembered life - and which had survived perfectly into what he thought of and hoped like hell was still his *transitional* life.

The first was the obvious one. which ended 'well, stop doing *that*, then.' and no more on it needs to be said.

The second he remembered from a book he had read as a twentieth-century boy. one of Spike Milligan's Second World War memoirs, about a troop of soldiers in a foreign land, and glancing upon some of those things that soldiers in foreign lands notoriously get up to.

One of the things that they got up to necessitated a periodic Short Arm Parade - which was. of course, quite a different thing from having an NCO walking down the ranks and having a butchers at your *small* arms.

It involved a troop of soldiers with their fatigue trousers round their ankles and a Medical Officer checking for signs and indications of physical unpleasantness.

So. the men are standing there, with the relevant operational military equipment on display. One of them, however, is extremely nervous, and when the MO comes to him he asks if he might have a quiet word.

'I'm a little concerned about... well, my size.' he manages.

'Don't worry about it,' the MO assures him. breezily. These things come in all sizes, and quite a few shapes, in the perfectly natural way of things. There's nothing to worry about at all. "

He takes a look, and realises that the hapless soldier is. indeed, severely and *abnormally* unequipped, in the matter in question.

'Hmm,' he says. Tell me. does it hurt when you pass water?'

3 It's an automatic truism, apparently, that. It's not the size, it's what you do with it that counts.' It's not the cubic capacity, it's the use to which that capacity is put. This is entirely true. I'm here to tell you - provided that the intended use is to have someone look at the item in question and go. 'You weren't going to do it with that, were you?'

'Not at all,' says the soldier.

'I'd just use it for that, then,' says the MO.

Advice for life, 2Jason thought, provided you took it as a metaphor for other things than your todger. A simpler, less circuitous way of putting it might be: Realise your Limitations Before you Make a Bloody Idiot of Yourself.

Now, after leaving me, he was in the General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette cockpit, watching Mira operate controls he remembered and loved, prepping the ship for interstitial translation. He really wanted to have a go himself - but he knew from hard experience that it would be like picking up a guitar or something, when he had never picked one up before, and expecting to get a tune out of it like the music in his head.

The only difference between 2Jason and myself, when you came down to it, was a matter of degree. It was like being dumped on a rotten floor with half the boards missing - but whereas the gaps were too wide for me to make the leap, 2Jason was tap-dancing as if his life depended on it, and hoping like hell he didn't put a foot through.

'Thanks for the help back there in the Manufactory,' he said to Mira. 'And for coming back. Why did you do that, though? You made it quite clear that you wouldn't.'

'Yes, well,' said Mira. 'It didn't actually cost anything, and when it doesn't cost, you might as well do the right thing. Besides, there's the whole pattern-recognition thing going on, yes? You remind me too much of... my Jason, the pair of you, to just leave you in the lurch. Even though everything you do or say shows you're not the real deal:

'It's those synaptic patches they used to stabilise me as a coherent identity,' 2Jason said. 'All those with-whiches and with-whoms breaking into my processes, and how stuff comes out sort of stilted. It's worse for the other guy, of course, but it should settle down for him in time. That's the virtue of having an organic brain. You can have a whole bunch of different and even self-contradictory things inside it, and it still finds a way to cope.'

'Where is the other one, by the way?' Mira asked.

'In the back,' said 2Jason, 'writing away, putting things down in some kind of order. I don't think he'll be out, much, for a while.'

Mira flicked a couple of controls. 'I'm laying in a course for the Collection. That was where I was supposed to meet up with *my* Jason before I picked up on you. You can find something there to take you on wherever you might want to go. That all right with you?'

'Urn...' One of the biggest decisions of 2Jason's life was that he was never going to go back to the Collection if he could possibly help it. It held too many memories, such as he retained, too many chances of bumping into people - and one person in particular.

He pulled out the data pad that Mira had given him, called up the GalNet Galactographic Map and flipped through the transit-routes between the Catan Nebula and the Collection.

'I'd rather you dropped us somewhere along the way, if it's all the same to you,' he said. 'What about somewhere in the Proximan Chain?'

'The Proximan Chain?' said Mira, dubiously. 'Is that a good idea, in your condition? Even the chaos-zomboids of the chaos-planet of Zob think the Proximan Chain is a bit chaotic.'

'It's a place that I know,' said 2Jason. 'Well, you know what I mean, I have memories of it. I remember places where we can go to ground - it's the ideal place to get ourselves lost.'

A Past Life: Nine

But, you say to me, if a recluse is a glutton, a drunkard, given to secret debauches with himself, he is vicious; he is virtuous, therefore, if he has the Opposite qualities. That is what I cannot agree: he is a very disagreeable fellow if he has the faults you mention; but he is not vicious, wicked, punishable as regards society to whom these infamies do no harm.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

We flew on, through Dakhaari space, making damn sure to circumnavigate the Dakhaar home world itself. Heading for the point of intersection between the territories occupied by the Three Empires and the planet Moriel, where it appeared that the War, if there was one, would be fought.

Things seemed to be going better between myself and Benny. Saving someone's life, I remember thinking, would tend to do that. Of course, it might have simply been down to the fact that there was more for her to do.

At some point after entering Dakhaari space, Benny had suddenly acquired the ability to speak Cluster languages - better than I could. And I'd only taken, you know, more than a bloody decade trying to learn and speak them.

She spent a lot of her time in the control cabin, listening to the hyperwave propaganda-broadcasts coming out of the Empires. I tended to tune it out; there was nothing in it that I hadn't heard before, nothing new.

For my own part, I have no idea what I was doing - and I'm not entirely sure that I did even then. I mean, it was one thing not to leave the girl stranded on Kalas, but here we were heading into a sodding war zone and highly probable death.

It's like those bits you get in books and such: 'somehow I'd walked out without my wallet', or, 'for some reason I went for the gun'... the *reason* being that if the poor sap *hadn't* gone for the gun, then the next exciting bit of the plot would simply not have happened. And his life would probably have been a lot happier, with far less incident.

In a strange way though... maybe that was almost exactly what it was. In the story of the Life of Benny Summerfield, the fact was that she had to be there and I was just the means of least resistance for getting there. And if you think that doesn't happen, that there aren't forces out there twisting lives to their own unknowable agenda, then I can only say - what universe *are you* living in?

All the same, it's a bit of a blow to realise that, in the end, you're nothing more than a walk-on part in your own bloody life.

On the other hand, of course, a large part of the decision to press on might have been the thought of hideous cyborganic monstrosities coming up behind us inexorably with a clashing and a rattling of their horrible tungsten claws... I kept a wary, constant eye on the aft proximity-sensor readouts, but I don't think I ever saw anything.

'Look, you really made me angry,' said Benny, suddenly.

Over the hours of listening to Three Empires propaganda, it seemed, she had been mulling over something entirely else, and now she had decided to broach it. 'I didn't deal with it very well. I'm sorry for that, at least.'

'What?' I said. 'I mean, pardon me? How did I make you angry?'

Benny did that thing of trying to find the right words and tone for what she was trying to say, then giving up and just saying it.'

'The morning after... you know,' she said. 'You just sat there and you looked right through me as though I wasn't there.' She scowled. 'A girl does *not* like being totally ignored after the best sex of her entire life and -'

'What?' I said, being as completely incredulous then as I am remembering it now.

(And thank you again, Original Jason. I really really hope you die. Horribly and painfully.)

For her own part, Benny seemed equally surprised at the words that had come out of her own mouth. 'I mean, all right,' she said, back-peddalling furiously, 'it's not as if I've ever had *that* much to compare it with, but...'

'You've got more to compare it to than me,' I said.

(How true, how true.)

'I mean, since the age of maybe 15,' I continued, 'I haven't even *seen* another human being, man or woman; you probably just triggered some sort of pattern-recognition reflex in me. I don't know what it's supposed to be normally like. I mean, for all I know I might be *gay* or something and -'

'Something like that,' said Benny, 'I'm sure you would have had suspicions by the age of 15.'

'That's why I said it. Fifteen's way too young to sort out what you are sexually, once and for all. It was for me, anyway - I was kind of what you might call the definition of a late starter, and after that I never got the chance.'

'You must have had some inkling,' Benny said, a little smugly, I felt. 'Even if you never went the whole way with anyone. I mean you must have had little girlfriends. Or little boyfriends, as it might have been.'

'Well, I suppose there was Kara,' I said, 'before I ran away from home, such as it was. And after that there was Beth. Then Danny, then Susan and Lisa. Lisa was something like 23 - which I thought was really *old* - and she taught me quite a lot. And then there was Carla, then Sean and then the four months I spent living in Danielle, Mo and Susan's squat in Euston before they kicked me out. That was a different Susan. And then there was Kimberly and then Micqui and Justin, and then Peter and Carmel and then Louise, which was like this totally bad scene and got me on the mostly celibate kick, which lasted the month or so until I was alien-abducted, which changed things quite a lot as you can probably imagine.'

'So, anyway, after that there was Rana, who was humanoid but more-or-less androgynous, and then I met Liva who wasn't humanoid but was what you might call *definitively* female; that was before Sali, of course, and after that there was Moira and Kamo and Sai d'RaKosh and...'

And it's at this point, here and now, that once again I honestly don't know what to think. The list went on, and I can remember every

name on it, but there's no point in repeating every one - because I have no memories in connection with any of them.

It's possible, I suppose, that I'd been piqued enough by Benny's sense of smugness to make the list up off the top of my head. In fact, I rather hope that's the case. The alternative would be that the original me had, for no good reason, decided to delete every memory of me having a good time in my life before I ever got it.

(Really horribly, Original Jason! Really horribly with big dogs and a spike!)

We now return you to our scheduled programming, where Bernice Summerfield is getting a little irate...

'How could I have been so *stupid*?' Benny snapped, slapping a hand to her head. 'Godess alone knows what I'm going to come down with! I'm probably now *crawling* with horrible uncurable human and alien STDs!'

'I thought that was supposed to be incredibly unlikely,' I said. 'What with different biological make-ups and all.'

(You have to remember, incidentally, as I do, that at this particular place and time I was the single representative of humanity in an entirely other biological system. It would take centuries, as I understand it, and an entire f - I mean an entire truckload of available human beings before all manner of biological nasties made the jump)

'Not if you've been with someone who's screwed half the sentient beings in the known bloody sector,' said Benny, darkly. 'Somebody who gives an entirely new *meaning* to the term species-jumping.'

This was not a little hurtful and, I remember, not a little annoying. 'Now you listen here,' I said. 'I'm thirty years old, now, near enough. How many thirty-year-olds do you know who haven't had the odd relationship or two?'

'*Odd* is a word that is entirely too appropriate,' Benny said murderously. 'It's the "or two" I'm having problems with. Some of us, at least, have some small sense of decorum. Some of us can still remember how many *times* we've done it without having to take our shoes and socks off.'

'Like who, for instance?' said I, knowing bloody well who, but there are certain things that sometimes just have to be said.

'Like me, for one,' said Benny.

'Yeah, well that's just because you're a tight-arsed, stuck-up bitch who thinks she pisses rose water and the sun shines out of her fundament.'

Although, come to think of it, there are things that might be better off not said at all.

'What?' said Benny.

'You heard,' said I.

'Silence!' cried a new and somewhat squeaky voice.

And it was at this point, I have to admit, that the world went a little bit strange.

Well, all right. Stranger.

A Second Life: Ten

History is the recital of facts given as true, in contra-distinction to the fable, which is the recital of facts given as false.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

The Proximan Chain was where you went when you wanted to get lost. A string of habitats - an interconnected cat's cradle of places where people imagined they could live, from space stations, to asteroidal dome-settlements, to actual planetary colonies - connected to each other by a network of teleportation-gateways left by some long-lost alien civilisation from time out of mind.

Nobody had, yet, quite worked out how they operated. The latest theorem was that their input accessed and reoriented itself in a quantum infraspaces where the equivalent of the Speed of Light was only 27 miles per second - but since that entire pocket universe was only 27 miles across in any case, it spat you out where you wanted to go almost instantly.

Not a bad deal, if you ignored the fact that every trip like that knocked the equivalent of something like a billion years off that pocket universe's life. Then again, when have considerations like that ever stopped anybody?

The end effect was that the Proximan Chain was the kind of place

that, when you were in it, you could simply go from somewhere to another without having to think about it - but from the outside it just looked like sheer bloody chaos.

Just the place to be, in fact, when you didn't want somebody keeping tabs on what you were up to.

Somewhere, as he made his tortuous and erratic way through the alien crowds, 2Jason could hear someone singing.

The song had a kind of music-hall lilt to it, of the sort you could imagine Flanagan and Allen singing - if 2Jason could for the life of him remember what a *Flanagan and Allen* was supposed to be - and it went like this:

*People,
Who are the most annoying people,
Are the most annoying people,
Who get in the way.*

*People,
Who like a church without a steeple,
Are the entirely useless people,
Who get in the way...*

*They blunder around with their asinine stunts,
Can't even seem to tell their backs from their fronts,,
Put 'em all together and they're just a bunch of idiots,
And that's why people say:*

*That people,
The truly most annoying people,
People who should all just die horribly in a stabbing,
Are the people who get in the way...*

2Jason listened with interest, trying to find where it was coming from. And, when he finally worked it out, he shut his mouth with a snap.

And then did the thing of consciously forcing his attention on his mouth, probing the back of his teeth with his tongue, to make absolutely sure that it wasn't open and singing things in spite of himself.

Fortunately, he had been singing it in English, of the old kind, and

indecipherable to ears attuned to the English that had become the lingua franca, as it were, of Galactic Human Basic.

Nobody was looking at him strangely - at least, no more than they would at anybody who was bellowing random gibberish on the street.

'Where the hell did *that* come from?' he muttered to himself, hoping that he wasn't coming across, now, like the sort of madman who bellows things out on the street and then starts muttering to himself.

Probably some frustrated and mean-spirited pocket of the personality that, on the whole, he was rather glad he couldn't consciously recall.

It was probably just a reaction to what he couldn't help thinking of as an Alien Environment. He might have the memories of years - decades - in such a thing, and memories of making the Proximan Chain his home away from home, but in some fundamental sense he had only existed, as a person, hardly more than I had.

Imagine a hugely, impossibly bright one-year-old baby, who has learnt to read, and has read a whole shelf of encyclopaedias, and thinks it knows everything. Then drop it the middle of any street and see how it copes. It was a bit like that.

Mira had brought the General InfraDyrix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette down at a subsidiary access-point to the Chain and let us off, before heading on for her meeting with what she thought of as *her* Jason.

She'd seemed a bit dubious about just leaving us here, possibly on account of frankly thinking we'd last about five minutes.

She'd even given us some money, and told us that when her business with the original Jason Kane was done, she'd come back to see us. Just to, you know, check that we were doing okay.

This might turn out to be useful. We recalled - at least, 2Jason recalled - that the original Jason Kane had been quite heavily involved with the recent Draconian war. And that a certain Professor Bernice Summerfield had some direct connection with the genocide that had ended it - which didn't sound like her at all, to us. It would be nice to learn how all that had turned out, without having to set foot on the Collection to do it.

2Jason, however, had had an address - in so much as addresses meant anything, here in the Proximan Chain - for what was effectively the equivalent of a lock-up garage. At least we'd have a

roof over our head, in addition to the force-shield that kept the air in the hab-bubble in which it was situated.

The lock-up had proved to be quite spacious, and packed with all manner of equipment, some of which I almost thought I could recognise and, given time, remember how it worked. Or what some of it actually did.

2Jason had left me in the back, to write and sort out my mind, and then had spent an hour or so skimming through every message he could find, on every GalNet account registered to Jason Kane that he could remember, on Mira's data pad. You never knew, he'd said, there might be something we could use.

He'd then announced that he was going out. The money we had was all well and good, but it wasn't going to last long - and certainly wasn't going to be enough to organise a proper organic body for himself, like what I had.

Now, out on the alien-crowded walkway, 2Jason was wondering where to start. He had memories of getting into... well, getting into trouble, for the most part.

Getting into situations where somebody had hidden some artefact, or totem or whatnot in his luggage and sinister people kept trying to steal it. Finding himself on a planet where, through no fault of his own, everybody thought he was a hero, with a capital H, and wanted him to deal with the local crime boss or some such. Having his home invaded, and having to look after a bunch of refugee children because nobody else would.

A whole world of excitement, and danger, and suddenly people wanting to kill you with a big gun, for which the original version of himself had been responsible. This could get a bit trying at times; 2Jason was thinking of getting a little card with I'M NOT HIM printed up on it.

Of course, the problem with that plan was that anybody close enough to have a little card handed to them had probably already done whatever they were going to do to Jason Kane in any case.

The thing was, though, that he remembered all these things *happening* to him... and that was rather the point. He had no idea, truth be told, of how he could *make* them happen on demand. He wasn't even sure that he could work out how to get into a floating illegal Mah Jong game, or whatever the Proximan equivalent was...

Such existential indecision, however, was curtailed, fortunately or otherwise, by the squeal of breaking vulcanised tyres.

'Jason!' came a voice. A female voice and youngish-sounding,

though it had the definite tang of the red-hot-poker-up-the-macaw that held the suggestion it should be middle-aged and shouting the word 'handbag'.

For an instant, 2Jason was torn between looking for the source of the voice and taking away on his heels. In the event, the former won out.

Sitting in a contrivance somewhat like a rickshaw, drawn by two hairless and naked bio-engineered, humanoid forms without heads, was a young lady. Of the sort that could only be called *forward*, at least so far as one or two points within her blousoneque dress were concerned.

2Jason had never seen her before in his life. He was certain that he'd remember if any version of him, ever, had seen her.

This lack of recognition, however, evidently did not extend to the young lady in question.

'Don't you remember me, Jason?' she pined, winsome as all get out. 'It's me, your little Ophelia!'

And it would have to be the sort of name you could get all sorts of suggestion out of, wouldn't it? That just made it all the harder. You'd have to stretch it into *triple* entendres, just to make it all fit.'

2Jason couldn't remember who she was for the life of him. Any version of himself, it didn't ring any bells. Ah, well, when you find yourself completely in the dark, just go back to operating on first and general principles.

'Ophelia, darling!' he cried, grinning charmingly. 'My, how we've grown! It seems so long!'

4 All of which of course is a supposedly humorous play on words which, even though they are talking about something else, are intended to make the reader think they are referring to a man's knob. Which is another word for his penis. (Clarification sponsored by the Galactic Cross-species Fund for the Explaining of the Subtle Complexities of the Humanoid Sense of Humour.)

A Past Life: Ten

Why, as we are so miserable, have we imagined that not to be is a great ill, when it is clear that it was not an ill not to be before we were born?

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

In the cargo hold, both Benny and I lurched round in shock at the sound of this new, angry voice.

Floating there (I'd never got around to fixing the antigrav unit) was Shug, glaring at us with three-eyed fury. There was something different about him, something I'd never seen before.

Possibly it was the huge blaster clutched in his paws. I'd never seen it before in my life.

'You will obey my every command!' it squeaked.

'Here we go again,' I heard Benny mutter, dispiritedly, beside me. 'Do you know, if I had a credit for every time somebody's said that, I'd have...'

'Silence!' Shug squeaked.

'Shug?' I said. 'You can talk?'

I was utterly astonished. Well, you would be, wouldn't you? More than a decade without a dicky bird, and then your pet - rapidly becoming an ex-pet it must be said - starts talking and waving a gun

in your face. This does not, in my experience, then or now, happen every day. It certainly gives one pause for thought.

My ex-pet snarled. 'Give the walking anthropoid a monkey nut. Have you any idea how *hard* it's been having to listen to your asinine grunting all these years, and never being able to tell you to shut your stupid, fatuous face? Have you? I thought I must simply have had the bad luck to pick the most brain-dead and idiotic human moron on the entire Earth-planet.'

He turned his little head to glower at Benny, balefully. 'I was wrong. Listen up the pair of you, because I'm only going to say this once...

'Now, *you* -' he prodded the snout of the gun in my direction - have an absolute and unthinking terror of any sustainable relationship because of your bad experiences with your family as a child. You equate love with violence and brutality, you think that it would turn you into a violent, brutal monster and this has led you into a seemingly interminable series of loveless and purely physical encounters where there can be no possibility of real involvement whatsoever...

'And you...' Shug turned his attention back to Benny. '*You* have the most classic case of a displaced Electra complex I've ever seen! Daddy went away and so assumed godlike, perfect proportions and you've been looking for him ever since! No man can ever measure up to Daddy, so you compulsively sabotage your relationship with every partner you ever have and manoeuvre them into betraying you - all unaware that you're simply re-enacting the deeper betrayal of Daddy leaving you in the first place!'

Shug twitched his huge blaster-gun in an irritated gesture that took in the pair of us.

'And now you've both met someone utterly compatible on the physical, hormonal and deep-subconscious levels and you're abreacting. To put it into words that even idiots like *you* can understand, you're both in love, you fell in love at first sight and you don't know it - and you're both such *utter* screw-ups that your respective reflex mechanisms are going into catastrophic overload in trying to sabotage it!'

Benny, I realised, was staring blankly at the angry little alien creature. 'Why are you... why are you telling us this...?'

'So you can shut *up* about it!' the angry little ex-pet shrieked. 'It's been going on for days now! On and on and *on* for days! If I hear one more sexual-chemistry-charged and mutually misunderstood argument I'm going to shoot the pair of you!'

Shug calmed down slightly, though it obviously took an effort. 'And I have to keep you alive,' it said in slightly more reasonable tones.

That seemed to be cause for relief, in any event.

'For the moment.'

'Oh,' said Benny.

'One of you, at least.' Shug scabbled with his backpaws in the air, working his way off to one side of the cabin. He gestured with the gun.

'Out. Keep your hands where I can see them. Not that a pair of idiots like you would be capable of thinking of anything to do with them.'

So we hauled ourselves through the hatch and, with Shug scabbling after us made our way back to the cargo hold.

'Oh, my...' breathed Benny when she saw what was now inside it, and I have to say I agreed with the sentiment.

The complicated nest that it seemed my ex-pet had been building forever now blazed with power. This was quite impressive in that the power seemed to be coming from what I remember as an old battery from Earth, of the sort that used to power bicycle lamps - though, of course, that was not the most impressive thing about it.

Tendrils of light crawled and tangled through the chamber, spun like a galaxy in miniature. It hurt the eyes, not only through its brightness. It seemed both impossibly big and impossibly small at the same time; something bigger than worlds viewed from far away but still, somehow, right in front of your face...

Beside me, Benny snorted. 'I've seen similar. And better.'

'Silence!' squeaked Shug. I formed the distinct impression that he was going to squeak that a lot.

'Years, I spent, rebuilding my translocator device,' he continued, 'after the accident that left me stranded on your pitiful planet Earth. And then years I spent rebuilding it *again* - this pitiful simulacrum you see here.' Shug sniffed, a little pettily, I thought. 'Wasted years, thereafter, spent trying to guide monkey-boy here to the right place instead of just generally farting around and never getting any nearer...'

'Well thanks a lot,' I said. 'You could have, you know, just asked.'

'Silence!' Shug turned his attention to Benny again. 'And then quite by chance, girl, I detected your... transportation. Your intended destination. Do you think it was mere accident that your journey was disrupted, and you yourself translocated to Jaris?'

'Can't say I ever thought about it,' said Benny, pertly. 'And it wasn't

my transportation, in point of fact. It's about as far from being my transportation as it's possible to get...'

'Silence!' Shug cried, yet again, with great vehemence, and then visibly collected himself. 'Prepare yourselves now. humans, for such wonders with which the puny human brain cannot even begin to cope!'

Still keeping us covered with the gun in his paws, Shug turned his head and made a small adjustment with his nose to what had once been his nest.

There was a thrumming, oscillating bass tone that I seemed to feel deep in my bones.

'Been there,' said Benny, dismissively. 'Done that.'

And the very world itself *lurched*..

A Second Life: Eleven

I ask pardon of the boys and the girls: but maybe they will not find here what they will seek. This article is only for scholars and serious persons for whom it is barely suitable.

- Voltaire. *The Philosophical Dictionary*

The home of this Ophelia girl was situated in its own private dome. An archaic-looking reproduction of a manor house, nestled in some quite extensive grounds filled with genuine organic foliage.

It was to here that Ophelia took him, and to her bedroom, where she had plumped the pillows, bid him to make himself comfortable and positively *insisted* upon feeding him.

2Jason had allowed that he might be feeling a little peckish, if by 'peckish' you meant half starved to death.

Now he looked around himself. This was the high life and no mistake. Bottles of hugely expensive vintage fizzy wine, many of them now empty but a number of them still quite happily full. Platters and salvers of Oolonan sprout-mackerel caviar, vol-au-vents and suchlike sumptuous comestibles, delivered by way of an ancient dumb-waiter. (The robot servant was an incredibly old, restored model, without speech-circuits.)

2Jason had been particularly taken with the slivers of a strange,

pink, sweet-tasting meat that tasted like nothing he could remember eating before.

Priceless works of art hung from the walls, hung there with the complete lack of care of one who neither knew nor cared what they were.

2Jason couldn't quite recall if he knew much about art, but he knew what he liked - i.e. portable, totally disregarded and worth a small fortune if, purely for the sake of argument you understand, you happened to nick it. There was a genuine Tracy Emin, if he was not mistaken - a used drinks napkin with the profoundly metaphoric *I shagged Damien* written on it in biro - that if sold would bring in the cost of a good second-hand ship.

The bedchamber itself appeared to offer two possible means of escape other than the big bay windows, behind their ornate drapes, that gave access to the grounds and the pressure-dome perimeter.

Double-doors led further into the manor and a gilt-and-silk wood partition led to a dressing room that, 2Jason suspected, was fully large enough to accommodate a light aircraft. Should a couple of armed guards burst in at this very moment, 2Jason thought, his best bet would probably be to dive into this dressing room and hide among the shoes.

Quite why these thoughts of *escape* were preoccupying him, 2Jason found hard to understand. This girl was rich, privileged, and obviously knew and liked him, in some version, even if he couldn't remember who she was for the life of him. If those putative armed guards actually turned up, she'd no doubt merely wave an imperious hand and send them on their way.

Perhaps it was the piece of 'art' in the bedchamber that patently was *not* disregarded: a polypropylene bust, on a plinth, of a scowling and quite brutal-looking man who seemed to be glaring at him. A little bronze plaque riveted to the plinth bore the name: Cholmoldly-Shrike.

It quite put 2Jason off his stroke - any stroke he might otherwise have tried to pull, certainly.

'Now, you wait here,' Ophelia told him, after they had finished eating, 'while I change into something comfortable for my poor, gallant young man...'

She went to the silk wood door to the changing closet and stepped inside.

It was traditionally at this point, thought 2Jason, that the guy is supposed to strip down to the buff, prance around the room for a bit,

stick a rose or available floral equivalent in his gob and then sprawl provocatively upon the counterpane to await the young lady's return.

At which time you find that the relationship is something entirely different from the one you expect, and actually platonic, and you suddenly can't think where to put your face. Certainly, it wouldn't be where you had been expecting to put it a second before.

2Jason cursed the holes in his memory again. Maybe this was some entirely, physically platonic relationship such as the sort he shared with Mira. Maybe there was even some abstruse *family* connection. He vaguely recalled that he had a sister somewhere or other - and, oh, dear *God* - but he couldn't feel any real connection between Ophelia and the idea of that.

This proved nothing, though, he thought dispiritedly, and given his luck, what would be the odds. The flirtatiousness might well still turn out to be a private game or something, and she'd probably come out of the closet in jeans and a sweater.

Having imagined the worst, 2Jason felt that he should feel relieved, since the true situation couldn't be all that much worse. There was still this feeling of dread, however, of some impending doom he hadn't thought of.

He pulled out the little comms-unit that Mira had given him and, more to allay his fears than anything else, ran GalNet search on the names Ophelia, Cholmoldly-Shrike and the GPS coordinates of the manor house.

There were a lot of results. Several hundred thousand of them - most explaining why the word *family* was on his mind. As in crime.

'Bugger,' said 2Jason.

The first hit showed a picture of the man depicted by the polypropylene bust in the flesh, and provided his full name, Jasper 'Legs' Cholmoldly-Shrike... a man who could have 2Jason's knackers in the blender before you could say knife.

Perhaps the most illuminating, if somewhat brief, description of the so-called Cholmoldly-Shrike⁵ Crime Family can be found in a GalNet profile written by investigative journalist Gregory Klumf.

In it, Klumf implies that the original Cholmoldly-Shrike fortune was carved out, three generations before, by Tarquentine Cholmoldly-Shrike, a respected Professor of Bilateral History at the Proximan Academy of Performing Historians.

5 Pronounced, in the way of things, 'Freeblywobbalferptang'.

Tarquentine, it seems, was also the chief supplier of concentration-enhancing smart drugs on campus, the trade made all the brisker by the fact that he was in the habit of making his lectures far longer and much more complicated than was strictly necessary.

Over the years, Tarquentine expanded his covert operations into new territories, including arms dealing, prostitution, money laundering, and the laundering of prostitutes' clothing when it became excessively dirty as a result of being worn by prostitutes.⁶

Such a state of affairs might have continued indefinitely, had not Tarquentine developed an unhealthy taste for the Academy's water-rugby team. After he was caught, in a rather intimately compromising position in the changing rooms, the faculty finally decided that enough was enough. They returned the poor genetically-modified walrus to its rider, and informed Tarquentine that it was time to take early retirement.

Loss of tenure, punitive taxation and any number of lawsuits from animal welfare organisations left Tarquentine flat broke. Things were looking bleak - until he had the good fortune to meet and marry one Oliveria diMarco, the widow of one of the Proximan Chain's most notorious crime bosses and a millionairess many times over.

Together they founded the most notorious and certainly most hedonistic pleasure resort in the entire Proximan Chain, Shangrilala Towers.

Humans and aliens now travel from all parts of the galaxy, and even beyond, to sample a wide range of Shangrilala pleasures, including the famed Spring Baths of Tranquillity, tri-limbed masseuses with a liberal attitude toward inter-species swinging, drugs, pornography, gourmet cookery to tempt the most jaded of palettes, genetically modified walruses and of course prostitutes, prostitutes and even more prostitutes.⁷

With an exponentially growing income from these somewhat unsavoury activities, the Cholmoldly-Shrikes were now set for life, prompting them to dome off a vast plot of prime real estate to build their family manor. It is there that the Cholmoldly-Shrikes have resided ever since, for three generations, culminating in the present patriarch of the clan, Jasper 'Legs' Cholmoldly-Shrike - who makes the original Tarquentine look like Mister Fluffy from Fluffy Land. Prostitutes.

6 There is evidence that the last claim was almost entirely made up, and that Gregory Klumf simply likes to write the word 'prostitute'

7 There goes Gregory Klumf again.

That, at least, was what Gregory Klumf had to say about the Cholmoldly-Shrike family until comparatively recently. *The core GalNet entry* under their profile now reads:

The Cholmoldly-Shrike family are perhaps best known, throughout the entire Proximan Chain, for the splendour of their balls. These sumptuous semi-annual galas are, quite rightly, renowned for their raising of funds for all manner of charities. from the succour of orphans. to the presentation of Chaotic Terrain, to the care of superannuated water-rugby walruses. Indeed, their balls are a copious marvel for all who might be fortunate enough to behold them.

The Cholmoldly-Shrike family are princes among men. and have no connection whatsoever with any form of organised crime in the slightest. And that includes prostitutes. What are you doing with that blender?

It was at this point that Ophelia came out from the silk wood closet, having changed into something more comfortable.

It didn't look particularly comfortable to 2Jason. There were quantities of leather, buckles and steel spikes involved, and certain areas looked quite unnecessarily prone to chafing.

'Ah. Jason, my gallant little man,' she declared, swishing a sudden tasselled riding-crop that seemed more appropriate for use on a genetically-modified water-rugby walrus. 'Now our hearts shall twine together in the joy of pain!'

2Jason was trying to remember if he was someone who enjoyed his heart twining together in the joy of pain, or whether he was one of those people who thought pain just *hurt* - when the doors of the bedchamber shook to a furious pounding.

'Ophelia!' came a voice from without. 'This is your poor dear mother, Ophelia! Why are these doors locked? What in all the worlds do you think you're about?'

A Past Life: Eleven

Why do we exist? Why is there anything?

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

'Blimey!' I picked myself up from the cargo-hold deck, and heaved at a couple of metal packing crates that had managed to fall on Benny. There was something a little incongruous about this, but I wasn't in much of a state to start thinking about it, what with having experienced wonders with which the puny human mind could not cope and so on.

'Are you all right?' I asked her.

Benny ignored my outstretched hand and sat up. 'I'm perfectly all right, thank you.' She knuckled at some wrench in the small of her back and grimaced. 'Though I don't think I'm going to be dancing the Fandango ever again. I certainly couldn't before.'

The old ones are the best, they say.

'Suit yourself.' I zipped up my leather jacket to the chin and stuffed my hands sullenly into the pockets. For some reason, the air in the cargo hold had turned a little chilly. I hoped the ship hadn't developed a slow leak.

'Keep your hands where I can see them!'

Shug, seemingly none the worse for wear, was squatting in the

partially melted remains of his junkyard nest, still pointing the gun at us. I pulled my hands out of my pocket and waggled my fingers at him.

'That's better.' Shug reared upright and catapulted himself out of the nest and onto the deck with a kangaroo-like kick of his hind legs. This was not a little alarming. One of the ways he'd been like a cat, in my experience, was that his little bits of spiteful viciousness had been sporadic flashes in a life spent in a lazy stupor. Either he'd found something with some serious caffeine in it, or he was far more active, on the quiet, than I'd ever given him credit for.

He jerked his head toward the loading doors. 'Open them.'

'Now wait a minute...' I said. The thing about loading doors is that, while they might be just the ticket for moving big things in and out of a ship, the one thing they didn't have was an airlock.

'I think it'll be all right,' Benny told me. 'I've felt this sort of thing before. I think we've... *travelled* somewhere. I think there'll be an atmosphere we can breathe.'

'I can breathe it,' Shug said. 'I don't care about you.'

'Charming,' I said.

Keeping my hands where Shug could see them, I walked over to the door controls and cut them in. There was a small electrical fire and a shower of sparks.

'Typical!' Shug muttered. He gestured with his gun for Benny to join me by the doors. 'Open them by hand.'

I reached for the emergency catches, keeping my face away from Benny, and said out of the corner of my mouth, 'Listen, the moment they're open I'm going to make a break for it.'

Benny shot a stony glance at me, which I of course caught out of the corner of my eye. 'Why does that not surprise me?'

'I'm going to be very obvious about it. You use that to get yourself away. I'll give you some time.'

'Oh,' Benny said quietly.

'If I thought you were capable of it,' Shug squeaked from behind us, 'I'd think you were plotting. As it is, I'll just shoot you to shut you up. Open the doors.'

The doors were buckled and jammed but eventually, with Benny hauling on one and me on the other, they gave. A hot and sandpapery wind blew into the cargo bay, scattering some of the lighter debris.

We looked out at the blood-red plain and the black citadel beyond... and at the several hundred ragged, furry three-eyed creatures who were waiting for us.

'My people,' Shug said happily. They have awaited my return. You will consider yourself a prisoner of... the Skrak!'

'Um,' I said to Benny. 'Maybe now might be a good time to rethink our basic strategy.'

Some short while later we were in the citadel, being marched through it by Shug, who had acquired what looked like a brass cradle on rollers, on which he trundled with a whine of servos. A number of his fellow creatures squirrelled through the internal structures of this citadel; this was obviously where they lived.

Shug had discarded his gun - but, since his cradle was equipped with a pair of nasty-looking blasters, this was hardly an improvement.

'I think this is Moriel,' said Benny. 'Bit of an effort to bring us where we were going to go anyway.'

She cast an eye over the citadel structure, which seemed to have been accumulated rather than built; piles of rusting steel and synthetics and what looked like wood, little more than piles of junk.

'I can't say I think much of the architecture in these parts,' she said dismissively.

Not for the first time - and certainly not for the last - I remember wondering if her determined flippancy in the face of danger was a conscious tactic, intended to wear an enemy down, or whether she was simply one of those people who, when faced with danger, just can't help rabbiting on.

'Silence!' Shug squeaked, yet again, trundling up and prodding her with one of his cradle-mounted blasters. She was going to get a nasty bruise, there, where he was, uh, prodding her. I'd rub it better.

'You know, whatever you're expecting to achieve by that, it isn't working,' Benny said. 'Aliens threatening me with guns and shouting *silence* is my natural environment. It's like coming home.'

'If you say one more word I'm going to shoot you in the mouth and blow your spinal column out of the back of your neck,' said Shug, in the tones of one who is utterly at the end of his rope. 'And I really mean it.'

Benny remained silent. She somehow managed to do it with an air of amused contempt, like she was giving baby his rattle.

Beyond the citadel, dunes swept down to a large and heavily fortified dome. Its surface was perfectly smooth, glistening in the sick light like a pustule.

'There reside the Emperors of the Three Empires,' said Shug,

gloatingly, gesturing towards the dome with a paw. They believe that they are up in orbit, in a space station and attending a high-level summit - but unbeknownst to them, they have been translocated here. They are our prisoners. They are at our mercy. We've been planning this for years...'

'Forgive me,' said Benny, 'but isn't all of this a bit needlessly expository?'

'That's because what I'm saying now is a cover-memory,' said Shug. 'Generated to hold a bundle of other memories together and have them make sense, so the entire subsidiary memoplex doesn't fall apart.'

'Oh,' said Benny. 'Nice to see a mind busily coming up with ways to reintegrate itself.'

'Don't mention it,' said Shug.

Before the dome were a number of pits cleaved into sandstone. Shug gestured to one with a paw. 'Get in.'

'What?' said Benny. 'If you think I'm going to -'

With a speed that gave her no time to react, a servo shot out from its housing in the cradle and grabbed her by the arm, wrenching her off her feet and flinging her into the hole. There was a brief cry and a thumping impact. I hoped she was all right.

'You will stay here, for the time being' said Shug. 'You might be of use.'

'Oh, yes?' came the voice from the hole, seemingly more angry than hurt. 'For how long, exactly? What am I supposed to *eat* down here?'

'Ah.' Shug turned in his cradle to face me. 'How remiss of me.'

And then he bloody shot me, with the blaster-cannon mounted on his stroller. It really hurt.

The impact set the whole front of my torso on fire and flung me back into the pit.

'You can eat that,' I heard the voice of Shug say, just before I lost consciousness.

I came round to find myself still, for a wonder, clinging to life, and for an even bigger wonder Benny was clinging to me.

She had been crying. There was a sort of wet feeling when she nuzzled her face to mine, in the sort of unthinking way that I gather primates do when another one is hurt.

'I... I have to tell you something,' I managed to croak.

'Don't try to talk.' There was a hopeless tone to her voice. The sort of tone you use to the dying.

'I have to,' I said. It's... a story. It isn't very long.'

I thought for a moment, wondering how I could put things. Then I continued.'

'My... grandfather. My mother's father. He was on the 'Normandy beaches in 1944. "Twenty-first Army Group. He couldn't tell anybody where he'd be going but the whole family knew it was coming... everybody knew the invasion was being mounted. My grandmother gave him a silver crucifix of "Jesus Christ Our Lord...'

*(Remember what I said, about those words and concepts where I seem to have no direct connection, and about the little *asterisks?)*

The *Germans left some snipers when they fell back,' I said. If my grandfather hadn't had the crucifix the bullet would have just clipped him. As it was, the bullet turned it into shrapnel, blew it through his left lung, kidney, liver and intestinal tract and killed him stone cold dead.

'That's why I never, ever took any chances, and years back I lined my jacket with a couple of layers of long-chain polycarbon micromesh. I'm going to have one hell of a lot of secondary-impact bruising, though, I reckon.'

For some while Benny just looked at me. Then she hit me, really hard.

The walls of the pit were unscalable, and tapered in towards the top. There was no way out. There was nothing to do but dream up hypothetical plans.

'Listen,' I mused. 'Shug didn't kill you when he had the chance. You're being kept on ice. He's going to use you for something and that means you're going to get out...'

'Leaving you down here,' said Benny. 'Fat lot of use that's going to be.'

'Well, okay, but he almost certainly thinks I'm dead. That's got to be something in our favour.' I waved a vague hand. 'I don't know; maybe they'll drop down a ladder for you or something and forget to pull it up. Maybe you can find a way of getting something to me. It's something to hope for, anyway.'

'Hope?' Benny snorted. 'You?'

'Hope for the best and prepare for the worst, that's me.'

Advice for life, there, if only I could remember to follow it.

For a while we sat in silence, backs to the wall of the pit, facing each other.

'All those things...' Benny said, suddenly, as if she had been

mulling something over for some while and was only now letting them out in one burst. Those things that pet of yours was saying back on the ship. All that stuff about love at first sight...'

I mumbled something noncommittal. As near as I can recall, I was thinking that whatever I said would probably end up *wrong*, so I wanted to see where she was going with this.

'I mean, that's not what love is. It's not about some one-night stand under the influence. We had some fun, but that doesn't have to mean anything else or more, yes? That's not love, right?'

'No it isn't,' I said shortly.

Now, as you know, I have no real memory of anything that might have taken place back in an alien boarding-house on Makrath, all those years ago - since some inconsiderate bloody sod decided I shouldn't have them in the first place. I do remember, though, that hearing Benny say it was no big deal was like a knife in my heart - and some of that must have come out in my voice.

Benny seemed, in some weird way, to simultaneously colour and pale at my tone, and fell silent.

We sat there in silence for a while.

'I suppose -' Benny said.

'What?' I said. 'What do you suppose?'

'Um. Nothing. I was just thinking, though,' said Benny carefully. 'That we're neither of us under the influence of anything, now, and I was just thinking... purely in the interest of knowledge, of course... that if we were to, say, I don't know, kiss, then we could know exactly where we stand and put all this "love" nonsense out of the way where it belongs.'

I thought about this seriously. 'Okay. Yeah. Yes. I'm game.'

We sort of shifted around and leaned into each other, navigated each others noses and brushed lips.

'That do anything for you?' I asked.

'Nothing. Not a thing.' Benny frowned in the near darkness. 'Only it wasn't really a proper test, was it? I mean if we were really going to test it then we should have tested it properly.'

So we tried again. Doing it properly.

And guess which bit I can't remember now. Go on, have a bloody guess.

I'm starting to think that a horrible death by rats, with extra rats and horror, isn't horrible and ratty enough. The man should be torn apart by rabid dogs.

A Second Life: Twelve

When nature formed our species and gave us instincts, self-esteem for our preservation, benevolence for the preservation of others, love which is common to all the species, and the inexplicable gift of combining more ideas than all the animals together; when she had thus given us our portion, she said to us: 'Do as you can.'

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

'Oh, my!' cried Ophelia, all of a fluster. 'It's Mother!'

'Oops,' said 2Jason, on general principles. Quick check on the flies. Nothing out of place. He was confident enough, he supposed, that he could talk himself out of a situation that - the mere technical fact of being alone with a girl in her bedchamber aside - was pretty much entirely innocent.

The question of Ophelia's current attire, though, he belatedly realised, was another matter entirely. He had momentarily forgotten that, whatever else it might be called, 'innocent' was hardly it. What with all the leather and the buckles and the spikes and whatnot.

'The dressing room!' All trace of her previous flirtatiousness had vanished, replaced by what seemed, to 2Jason, a genuine fear. 'She'll kill you! She'll have you killed! The dressing room, now!'

Antique metal keys were rattling. 2Jason decided that what with one thing and another all things considered, the dressing room might be a very fine idea indeed.

As the gilt-and-silk wood door clicked shut behind 2Jason, the bedroom doors were flung open and Ophelia's mother, Mrs Cholmoldly-Shrike, strode into the room.

To say she was of a somewhat stern demeanour would have been too kind. A manner akin to that of a cadaver was, indeed, rather nearer the mark. Cold and full of chemicals. Something was clearly rotting away under the heavily made-up facade. Possibly the mind.

(Or maybe we are once again just projecting some part of ourselves on the world around us, hmm?)

Mrs Cholmoldly-Shrike glared at her wayward daughter, summarily unimpressed by the picture of innocence curled up on the bed beside a somewhat oversized stuffed teddy bear and reading a book.

Of course, all the leather, buckles, spikes and the whatnot might have been a bit of a giveaway.

'I'm sorry, mother,' Ophelia said, still trying gamely in the face of all the available evidence. 'I didn't hear you calling. You know how it is when you find yourself drawn to contemplate a particularly interesting passage.'

'I'm quite certain I do *not*,' said Mrs Cholmoldly-Shrike, pointedly, prodding at one of a number of empty fizzy wine bottles, which had fallen onto the floor, with her toe.

She turned to address the liveried figure of some wrinkled old retainer in the hall beyond the doors.

'Scroat, go and tell your master to bring his gun! The big one! Our Ophelia's been out picking up rough trade again!'

It was at this juncture, of course, that 2Jason, who had been listening intently with an ear pressed to the dressing room door, began to feel very nervous indeed.

The worst part was waiting for the other shoe to drop. The metaphorical shoe, that is, as opposed to the splendid piles of shoes in the dressing room, which seemed to be encroaching up to his knees.

One wall of the closet, he noticed, was not taken up by shoe racks, or gowns, or clothing of any kind. Row upon row of shelves were filled with holo-sim wafers. 2Jason stared at them in recognition.

There was *The Ascent of Humanoid Man, Barehanded*. There was *The*

Trouble With Squazuloni Betazoa Prime. There were *Xenomorph Bondage Slaves* parts 1 to, at last count 749...

There was, in fact, arranged with neurotic neatness and in alphabetical order, the entire oeuvre of Jason Kane xeno-porn. Experimentally, 2Jason eased one of the data wafers from the rack.

The case had been signed, 'To Ophelia, my biggest fan!' by Jason Kane.

Ah, well, that explained a lot. It was always nice to have fans, even if in this case it was for something he had never done. It's difficult to make a start, in the glamorous and lucrative world of xenobiological porn, when there's another version of you busily glutting the market.

All in all, though, it was a bit of a pity that this particular fan was putting him in severe danger of being killed.

Somewhat belatedly, 2Jason realised that he might be able to slide the dressing room door open just enough that he could see what was going on in the bedchamber through the crack. This he did - just in time to see Jasper Choldmoldly-Shrike enter with his gun.

Years of good living and a fluffy towel dressing gown had left Jasper 'Legs' Choldmoldly-Shrike slightly more podgy-looking than as he was depicted on his bust, but no less nasty.

Mention of his 'big' gun had for some reason put 2Jason in mind of the sort of blunderbuss which had, long ago, once shot at elephants on Earth - before elephants had fallen prey to a twenty-first-century retrovirus, mutated into a rudimentary intelligence with basic tool-using capabilities and had started firing back. This was worse - a custom-built Thompson chopper straight out of a gangster movie, and certainly capable of chopping 2Jason in half.

This did not seem fair, in the considered opinion of 2Jason. He had been nothing if not the complete gentleman throughout this whole sorry affair. At least, while waiting to see what the affair actually *was*. And now he was going to be shot by a big gun.

Trapped, there was nothing to do but back off further into this dead end. The dressing room did indeed seem larger than any sane person could ever need. He backed on through the hanging gowns, the racks of underwear and shoes. He could almost convince himself that it *was* possible to hide in here after all. And possibly end up scoring a free lifetime-supply of Turkish Delight...

'The bastard's in the closet!' came a furious voice from without. Obviously not, then.

There was the ratchet-sound of a firing-mechanism being cocked.

'Nooo, Daddy!' came the plaintive cry of Ophelia. 'Daddy, please! Not my clothes!'

'Damn your clothes, poppet!' came Cholmoldly-Shrike senior. 'Nothing shall stop the rain of leaden death that is the very right of a disgraced father, clothes and all!'

There were sounds of a struggle, the cough of automatic fire. None of it hit the clothes or 2Jason - he could only assume that, in struggling with his daughter, Jasper Cholmoldly-Shrike had fired harmlessly into the ceiling or some such.

Next time he would not be so lucky.

Nothing for it, then. The time had come for bold, decisive action.

Shik-click.

Well, all right, the time had quite possibly come for bold, decisive crawling and grovelling...

Click. Click. Click.

'Damn,' Jasper Cholmoldly-Shrike muttered. 'The bloody thing's jammed...'

Boldly and decisively, 2Jason burst from the closet, with the bold decisive intention of leaping from the window and having it away through the Cholmoldly-Shrike grounds. They'd seemed big and intricately landscaped, what he'd seen of them on the way in. There was bound to be somewhere he could hide.

Maybe he could find a maintenance hatch or the like in the dome perimeter...

Thompson slugs typewritered into the expensively simulated plaster of Paris as he made the window and crashed through it.

Risking a look back as he fell, 2Jason saw that Ophelia had collapsed on the bed, the back of a hand pressed rather theatrically to her brow, while her mother fussed over her. It would have been a scene from classic GalNet costume serial, he thought, if it hadn't been for all the leather and spikes and the whatnot. As it was, it looked more like a scene from something written and produced by Jason Kane.

He hoped that the young Lady had merely succumbed to an attack of the vapours in all the excitement, rather than having caught a stray round - but he certainly wasn't going to go back and check.

It was definitely long past time, 2Jason thought, that he made his excuses and left.

'Did you have fun?' I asked a somewhat battered and harassed 2Jason, when he finally made it back to the lock-up, which had been

rented some years before by the original Jason Kane, and which 2Jason had remembered about when we had arrived.

'You don't want to be out there,' he said, shuddering. 'It's stupid and scary and you never know what's going on. You're well out of it, believe you me.'

'Was any of it to do with, you know, the thing?' I asked.

'I don't think so,' said 2Jason. 'At least I hope the hell not. I think it was just something random turning around and biting the wrong person on the arse. That original version of us really seems to put it about...'

'Leaving us to deal with the fallout,' I agreed. 'When it turns around and bites us on the arse. Like if it was a big dog, I mean, instead of being fallout.'

'You're sounding better, anyway,' said 2Jason. 'A little bit more alert than you were.'

'Anger tends to do that,' I said. 'The bastard kept all the best stuff for himself and left us with the dirty end of the stick. It occurs to me, you know, that if this big danger Mira was talking about doesn't finish him off - maybe we should go and have a pop ourselves.'

'I know the feeling,' said 2Jason. 'I'm just wondering if your cortical functions are kicking in to the point where you know the difference between wanting to do something and really doing it.'

'Don't worry about it,' I told him. 'I'm good. Well you know what I mean. And I'm pretty much up to speed.'

2Jason dusted off his hands, and turned his attention to the various items of equipment arrayed around the lock-up walls.

'I suppose we'd better make a start, then,' he said. 'For when and if we're right and Mira does come back. Time to stop the play-acting and get serious.'

A Past Life: Twelve

What is one to think of a child with two heads? Without deformity apart from this? Some say that it has two souls because it is provided with two pineal glands, with two *corpus callosum*, with two *sensorium commune*. Others reply that one cannot have two souls when one has only one chest and one navel.

- Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary*

It's a good job, it seems to me, that I'm simply trying to put what memories I have in order and make sense of them - because anyone expecting the Exciting Adventure of how Jason Saved the Day is going to be sorely disappointed.

And come to think of it, I don't think I've Saved the Day ever in my life, and I'm not just talking about the fact of being one just a few years old, or less than a week old, or any other way you want to reckon it.

My memory picks up again, without any sense of transition, with me slouching moodily in the prison-pit alone. I have a kind of ghost-memory, I suppose you'd have to call it, of Benny being taken up and out in a kind of sling, but I can never be sure if that's just my mind filling in the blanks.

Up above, I could hear the sounds of fighting. The sandstone under me shook to the concussion of explosions. Big things were obviously happening up there, but on the whole it was a bit of a relief to realise that I was probably safer where I was.

After a while, the fighting seemed to move off from the immediate area. This was good in that it further lessened any danger, of course, but bad in that it left me alone with my own thoughts. My worries about Benny and what was happening to her.

It occurred to me that she was the only person I'd worried about, or even cared what happened to, in the last ten years of my life. All my life, really; the last person I'd felt this kind of concern over had been my little sister, Lucy - and look how well that had turned out.

Another sense-memory here. Another little flash of misery that seems to exist in me, self-contained and on its own.

I'm a younger kid, younger than the memories I remember clearest, maybe seven or eight. Lucy is three or so.

And we're hiding in the airing cupboard, while our father storms through the house, looking for us. It's his version of hide-and-seek. He pretends it's a game... and I honestly couldn't tell you if he actually believes it or not.

It would take a child far younger and dumber than me to believe that an airing cupboard is any kind of real hiding place in a smallish, post-war prefabricated house. It's part of the game.

Lucy is anything but dumb. She's bright, like the little star that she is. But she's also only three years old. She honestly thinks that, if we stay still and quiet, he won't know we're there.

And so at some point, of course, I'm going to have to leave her here, in the soft dark warm of laundered sheets and towels, and go out to face the bastard. That's the only way the game ends.

Maybe I can push him into taking everything out on me. Maybe, that way, he might leave her alone for a while.

(Here and now, off and on, I've made a point of trying to find old twentieth-century records that might survive, looking for any clue as to the past life of the original Jason Kane.

I've never found anything related to him, his/our/my family, and certainly nothing about a sister. No reason why anything like that should have survived, of course, after all the upheavals of years. I can't help wishing I could find something, though, that told me Little Lucy made it out okay.)

After what seemed like several hours down in the hole, but could have been any time at all, I heard the scrape of boots above me. I held my breath and stayed motionless, fighting the sudden urge to sneeze which I think you have to have at times like these by law or something.

The silhouette of a head was outlined in the mouth of a hole. Then it withdrew.

'Nothing there,' said a strangely metallic male voice, muffled by the earth and the fact that it was speaking softly, like a speaker with the gain turned down. 'Just the body.'

'Oh, hell,' said a similar but female voice. 'That must have been horrible for her.' It paused. 'Let's get moving.'

I remember staying still for a moment, not out of fear and trepidation but out of shock. This was only the second time I'd heard people speaking English in more than a decade, after all, if you didn't count Shug. Different intonation and accent from Benny's, but English none the same.

'Uh, excuse me?' I shouted. 'Can you hear me? I need a little bit of help down here and... Hello?'

My first thought, on being hauled out of the hole, was that I'd made an awful mistake. These people were dressed in high-end and rather nasty looking Cluster-based military armour. I had the horrible fear that they'd regard me as a combatant in whatever was going on, and at best pack me off for interrogation to determine which side I was on.

Fortunately, my initial instincts had been correct. The pair were a part of the same time-hopping team as Benny, working undercover to make sure that history worked itself out in the right way or some such.

'The Three Empires are on the point of merging and kind of cancelling each other out,' said one of them, a smallish and serious black female, so far as ethnicity could be discerned under her impact-faceplate.

I would later come to know this pair quite well - that is, if it's not like this incredibly disappointing spoiler to learn that I survived the events in question long enough to get to know anybody. It's one hell of a shock to be learning that, I know, I know, but do try to show a bit of the old steely resolve and get a grip.

Their names (I'd learn) were Roslyn Forrester and Chris Cwej - that

last one looks a little odd to me, because I *think* of it as 'Shvey'. It seems to have gone down like that automatically, though. One of those pronunciation things, probably, in the same way that something like '*Freeblywobbalferptang*' goes down as Cholmoldly-Shrike.

Roz and Chris, unlike Benny, actually were from Planet Earth - only an older and somewhat darker Earth than the one I knew. They had been cops in one of the HyperCity-states, where by all accounts there was, or will be, or *historically* was a kind of future feudal system, with an overclass and an underclass who were effectively slaves.

Roz had originally been from one of those classes, and Chris from the other - cops, or Adjudicators as they were known, being drawn from both on an ostensibly egalitarian basis. I'll bet that the various ranks of the Adjudicators were occupied by the upper and lower class in the proportions you might expect. And certainly not inversely proportional.

Funnily enough, I remember that when I first heard them arguing about this state of institutionalised serfdom, I got the wrong end of the stick, because Roz was of African descent, and Chris of Scandinavian. My reaction, as I recall it, was annoyance that in the Future people were still stupid.

Then I had learnt that their positions in the hierarchy, while still dependent to a certain extent on melanin-content, were the reverse of what my own canalised thinking had assumed them to be. My reaction was *still* annoyance that people in the Future were still stupid.

'The Empires are making themselves obsolete,' Roz continued now, 'to be replaced by on the whole more egalitarian systems of government. I don't know all the ins and outs - except that these Skrak, or whatever they're called, just want to take over and they're not up to it. They go down hard and take the entire Cluster into bloody chaos with them.'

Privately, I was of the opinion that bloody chaos was the natural state of my life. I could get bang behind the idea of nobody wanting to live in it.

As we hurried through the inside of the dome, in which the rulers of the Three Empires were being held, and in which I gathered that some kind of final confrontation was being held, I briefly wondered if I should ask for the borrow of a weapon.

I decided against it, largely on account of the fact that the guns

being toted were serious bits of kit, crawling with eject-vents and complicated controls, and I'd have like as not blown my own head off if I'd tried to use one.

A thought occurred, and I stuck my hand in a pocket to find the little needle-gun that had lain there forgotten since the gods knew when. That was more my hammer, I thought; more in keeping with my place in the general scheme of things.

At length we came to what had once, obviously, been a splendidly appointed meeting-chamber, where the rulers of the Three Empires had conducted the business of what they'd thought to be their Summit. It was somewhat the worse for wear, but I breathed a small sigh of relief when I realised that whatever battle had taken place in here was over.

That was before, of course, I realised that the battle might be over, but our side had lost.

There were Cluster-soldiers there, but they just stood there blankly, zombified, as though their minds had simply been switched off. Shug and a number of other Skrak were there, in their strollers, and a pair of them were restraining a slightly bruised and extremely sullen-looking Benny with their servo-claws.

For some reason, incidentally, I keep getting the feeling that there was someone else there, someone I've forgotten. It's not important, probably, but it niggles a bit at the back of my mind, when I try to pin it down, in the way that unimportant details sometimes do.

More importantly, the heads of state of the Three Empires were there, in a huddle: the de facto rulers of the Cluster. A heavy-set and somewhat thuggish looking man who led the Czhanos, a younger and slighter man who led the Saloi, an extremely healthy-looking, green skinned girl who held dominion over the Dakhaari... and they were being menaced by a pack of cyborganic creatures, automata of a sort I'd seen before.

They were the same sort of creatures I'd seen menacing Benny on Kalas, right before I landed a ship on top of them.

Benny's military-clad friends put up a good fight, but were almost instantly overwhelmed. I'd like to say I even got that far, but I barely had a chance to raise my little needle gun before it was knocked out of my hand by one of the cyborganic things, and a horrible tungsten claw was instantly round my throat and lifting me so that the tips of my toes barely touched the floor.

Shug looked at me with an air of annoyance. I got the impression (or possibly I'm imposing it, since I later learnt that it was true) that

myself and Benny's friends were merely the latest in a long line of interruptions. 'I thought I'd killed you,' Shug said. 'Never matter. That just means I'll get to kill you all over again. Won't that be fun?'

He turned his attention back to what, apparently, was a speech in progress.

'Now as I was saying,' he declared, in rather a pompous manner. 'When I am declared Grand and Mighty Leader of All Skrak and the Cluster Entire, my first order of business shall be to -'

'You shall never be Grand and Mighty Leader!' came a squeaky voice.

'Oh, what is it now?' cried Shug, flinging up his little paws in exasperation.

'You will not lead the Skrak!' The voice came from one of the smaller of Shug's fellow creatures and, if it were possible, even rattier-looking. 'Far less shall you rule the Cluster Entire - for that is a job that will be reserved for me!'

'Just you wait,' Benny hissed at me furiously, from where she was restrained between two servo-assisted Skrak. 'Just you wait till you get killed and come running to me. I'm never going to speak to you again!'

'Garg!' I said, on account of the automaton's claw still around my throat. 'Gragle rek brug ghaarg!'

Benny sniffed and made a little show of pointedly ignoring me - I got the impression that she was doing it as a cover so that she could scope out the room, but there's always the possibility that she was sick of looking at me.

Off to one side, the rebellious Skrak was face to face with Shug and having a small gloat.

'Yes, I was just a brood-hatchling,' it was saying, 'but even then I knew the lust for *power*.' It wheeled back a little in its stroller. 'It was easy to sneak into your villainous control chamber and change your calculations. It was J who left you stranded on that distant monkey-planet, all those years ago. It was I who learnt all the secrets that you kept from us, and learnt how to place the Otherlings under my personal control! Like this!'

The Skrak touched a control on the box bolted to its stroller, and several of the cyborganic monstrosities turned their attention to Shug and advanced on him, their pincers snapping.

Shug stared at his would-be usurper with three increasingly fearful eyes.

'You have learnt all my secrets?' he said, in worried tones. 'All the plans and schemes I laid for years?'

'That I have,' said the little antagonist.

'All of them?'

'All of them,' said the rebellious Skrak.

'What about the trapdoor over a pit full of spikes that happens to be directly under you?' said Shug, touching a control on his own stroller. 'Ah. I see that you didn't.'

'Right!' Shug continued, as his would-be rival disappeared into the floor, mechanical stroller and all, with a despairing cry and a somewhat nastily wet-sounding crash. 'Are there any *more* interruptions waiting in the wings? Does anybody *else* want to have a go?' He waited. 'Fine, then. Now maybe I can get back to the business of killing the whole damned pack of you and begin my Glorious Reign...'

It was at this point, and quite without warning, that the big double doors of the chamber blew off their hinges.

And something came through it.

It must once have been two huge automata run on internal combustion and clockwork. Now it was a misshapen, hideous amalgamation lurching upon three limbs, one of which was the remains of an arm, a single eye blazing like a red sun in the flattened remains of a head connected to the shoulder socket of a torso.

Shug began to whimper, backing away on his rollers, but the amalgamated thing came, inexorably, on.

It stopped before him, rocked slowly back and forth, scanning him with its blazing searchlight eye.

And then it jumped on him.

It jumped up and down until Shug was completely squished, and then it switched itself off.

The amalgamated automaton, I later learned, when the remains of its processing core had been deconstructed and analysed, had amalgamated and self-repaired itself from the remains of the automata that had attacked Benny back on Kalas. The automata that I had landed my ship on.

The reason that they had been activated, it seems, their original purpose, had been to hound us closer to a point in space from which Shug could operate his jury-rigged transporter device - and then to simply obliterate us when we were no longer needed.

The process of reassembling itself, apparently, had disrupted its

operational routines and had it targeting its creator instead of us. Instead of, as it were, 'target humans + protect Shug', its primary motive was compressed into 'target Shug'.

Just goes to show, I suppose, the dangers of trying to compress two things into the space of one. You never quite know what might get lost.

Then again, it might just be down to the fact that *every single robot in the universe, ever*, will at some point turn around and try to kill the person who made it. I think it's a natural law or something.⁸

As for the Summit on Moriel itself, I gather that the various and somewhat Byzantine machinations, with or without those of the villainous Skrak, in the end came to a degree of accord and a kind of ceremonial group-marriage. Takes all sorts. I am absolutely certain that nobody whatsoever has done anything so much as even approaching wiping my mind of any involvement he or she might have had in effecting the matter, on account of he or she never so much as existing in the first place.

I also remember that Benny and I got married, shortly after. Looking back over the above, though, I cannot for the life of me imagine *why*. Maybe the secret lies in the things that were withheld from me, the things I can't recall - or maybe I was just as oblivious to any number of things then as I tend to be now.

So much in my life, I think, seems to centre on finding myself in situations I'm unequipped to understand. I see this, I see that, things happen to me and it's only later that I get some explanation that lets me see the larger picture.

I can only assume it's the same for everyone else, really. But why is it, then, that everyone else seems to give the impression of knowing what is really going on?

I mean, it only ever happens all the time. I wish it would stop, if only for just long enough for me to catch my breath. Is that too much to ask?

Back in my memories of being a child, in my mind, I remember reading some article in a science fiction magazine I used to get. A list of all the themes and techniques and whatnot that they used in books.

One of them, I remember, was called *a signal from Fred*. Fred was

⁸ Natural Laws may not be applicable to every possible universe. Please refer to the local physical constants of any universe in which you currently reside.

a character who would forever be piping up with things like, 'This doesn't make sense!' or, 'Why didn't you do such and such instead of such!' or, 'What were you *thinking*, didn't you *realise* what would happen if you did that?'

Fred was, of course, not just a character in the book, but a reflection of whoever it was who was writing it. The confusion and the panic and the sense that things were going nowhere was the writer, effectively, talking to himself.

And this is apposite, of course, because that's what I've been doing. Talking to myself, telling myself a little story and pretending that I don't really, in actual fact, know it all by heart. The fact is, of course, that this is nothing more than a structured delusion: me sitting in some generic room out the back and writing.

I thought all the business of adding little "stars to the bits I supposedly didn't understand was a nice little touch. I mean, it's true so far as it goes, but it really serves to bring out the sense of lameness.

'Out the back' might be true, though, if you count the back of the brain.

It's not that hard, a bit like method-acting, to pretend that you're telling yourself things you don't know. A useful cover for the things you're *really* thinking about while you do.

And if you think that's a big reveal or something, then you *really* haven't been paying attention.

Think about it, for a moment, and you'll get it. It took me quite a while to work it out myself.

A New Life: One

We soon become tired of everything in life; riches fatigue the possessor; ambition, when satisfied, leaves only remorse behind it; the joys of love are but transient joys; and Candide, made to experience all the vicissitudes of fortune, was soon disgusted with cultivating his garden.

'Mr. Pangloss,' said he, 'if we are in the best of possible worlds, you will own to me, at least, that this is not enjoying that portion of possible happiness; but living obscure in a little corner of the Propontis, having no other resource than that of my own manual labor, which may one day fail me; no other pleasures than what Mrs. Cunegund gives me, who is very ugly; and, which is worse, is my wife; no other company than yours, which is sometimes irksome to me; or that of Martin, which makes me melancholy; or that of Giroflee, who is but very lately become an honest man; or that of Pacquette, the danger of whose correspondence you have so fully experienced; or that of the hag who has but one buttock, and is constantly repeating old wives' tales.'

- Voltaire, *Candide, or, The Optimist, Part II*

After readying and checking the equipment arrayed around the walls, there wasn't much to do but wait. We spent some time on the GalNet news streams, reacquainting ourselves with what was going on in the galaxy at large.

It wasn't particularly edifying. When you have memories spanning five hundred years, the news that some bunch of guys are fighting a territorial war somewhere, or that idiots still strap explosives to themselves and explode them in medical facilities full of children, tends to be depressing rather than informative.

Apart from the equipment round the walls, the lock-up also contained items stored under tarpaulins, left here from when the place had been occupied by the original Jason Kane. The biggest was the stripped-down chassis of a hover-pod, mounts attached to the frame that looked like they would fit a heavy-duty blaster rig.

Various other odds and ends of old mechanical junk. A battered and mineral-oil-stained cardboard box contained a number of well-thumbed trade magazines. Everything was exactly as prosaic and uncomplicated as it proclaimed itself to be.

The time wore on.

'Do you know,' one or the other of us said. 'I don't think she's coming after all.'

That was, of course, sympathetic magic to make the data pad that Mira had given us start bleeping, which it duly did. It was plugged into a quite extensive comms-unit, with a bank of film-screen monitors, and we fired up a screen.

'How ya doing?' said the face of Mira.

'Could be worse. How did you get on with our esteemed original?'

'No problems,' Mira said. 'It didn't take long to sort things out. Well, it did, I suppose, in a sense... but let's just say time was not the issue. So, hey, do you need a hand with anything? I don't have anything on at the moment, and I still feel sorta bad about just leaving you in the lurch.'

Yes, we told her, we could use her help with one or two things. We gave her the address of the lock-up and cut the connection.

Then we just sat for a while, not thinking about very much. Not thinking about very much, at this point, was more or less the point.

'Brings back memories,' said Mira, as she came through the door. 'I haven't been in this place since...'

'Now!' one or another of us snapped, pretty much superfluously, and we hit a control switch.

The stasis-emitters ranged around the walls hummed into life, and hit Mira with their nodal point. She didn't jerk or lurch as though being zapped or anything. She simply stood there, doing nothing - which was, of course, rather the intended point.

'I wouldn't try to fight against it,' I told her. The field's grabbing your implant-traceries. It would be like trying to move against ganglions of razor-wire inside your own body.'

'I know that,' Mira snorted. 'Why do you think I'm standing here and not doing much?'

'It's just to be sure that you won't flip out or something and you know, tear our heads off with inhuman cyber-enhanced speed,' I said. 'I mean, it's not like we're any actual good at all the fussin' and the fightin'. We'd last about half a second if you did that.'

'Half a second?' said Mira. 'You give yourself far, far too much credit. Nice to see, by the way, that you've finally dropped the pretence of having more than one actual body between you, by the way.'

'Yeah, well,' I said. 'I'd bang on about being in two minds about everything, if it wasn't so banal and obvious. We kept the cleavage between the active and improvisational components and the passive, contemplative components going longer than was healthy. They're taking time to properly reintegrate. I keep thinking in terms of "we" and "us" instead of "I" and "me", you know? It's time we started seeing all the things that were pretty obvious from the start.'

'Is good to big extremely negative degree,' the Manufactory med-tech had said, managing to convey how hopeless the situation was by a shrug of its gloptuous tentacles. 'Too late for him, too many holes. He wake up, nothing for him but to dribble and sit in own micturational matter.'

I'd looked at the partially formed body in the skeining tank. It was not a pretty sight. It was not particularly gory, and the process was the exact reverse of a body being, say, violently dismantled in an explosion, but it still took a strong stomach to look at it. A stomach that the body itself, at that point, had not yet got.

'So what about me?' I asked, getting to the most important matter in hand. 'What if I go through the process? I mean, you've stabilised me, right?'

Several of the med-tech's oxygen-intake valves gave a series of wetly bubbling hisses that were the equivalent of a human mechanic, as it might be, sucking on his teeth.

'Not good-thing,' its said at last. 'Stabilising armature too strong. Remains of original personality shear away from it, yes? Leave to like a robot - human body, human head, nothing human inside.'

So the choice had been to remain myself, so much as the essential *me* remained, in a rapidly deteriorating artificial body... or something walking around in a human body, thinking it was me, but with nothing of me inside.

Would there even be a sense of continuity, some transfer of the soul, or whatever you wanted to call it? I wouldn't like to bet on it.

There must be something else,' I told the med-tech. 'What other option is there?'

'They attempted a hybrid procedure,' I told Mira, as she stood there immobilised in the lock-up. 'Patching what was left of the essential *me* into the other guy, in a way similar to the lexicon-patches that had stabilised me in the first place. I went into him, or he got a dose of me, take your pick.

The idea was that what was left from both of us would compensate for each other. There was a bunch of overlap, of course, things reinforcing themselves and running hot. I reckon I could be a bit of a total genius in some things. You know, if I ever managed to work out what they were...

'One way in which I certainly wasn't a bloody genius: I knew that the manufactory was a bit dodgy - the whole mind-transfer procedure wasn't exactly above board, after all. I guessed that they were involved with things like organ-trafficking and the slave trade on the quiet. But the fact that they were doing it on the quiet was the point. They'd only do it to the sort of unfortunate people who found themselves alone in the world, with nobody left around to care for them and make a fuss.

'Thing is, maybe it was the degeneration, or the fact that I didn't want to think about certain stuff, or maybe it was just simple stupidity... the thing is, it just never occurred to me to realise that I *was* alone, by this point. The result of the transfer would be the last survivor of a bunch of copies that nobody had really wanted around in the first place, and with nobody left to care...'

I have to admit, if I'm honest, that in my more mean-spirited moments, I sometimes wish that you could press a little button and make certain people... well, simply be Not There.

I mean, it got confusing, sometimes, when I tried to think in terms

of me, myself and I. Nagging at me always, in the back of my mind, was the knowledge that there was Me, and the Original Me - and let's not get into how the Original Me got to keep all the good stuff - and then there was the Other Me, and then Another Me After That... Jason Kane, the handy economy pack: four for the price of one.

It was like the way that you make magic carpets operate. You sit on them and don't think of a blue camel - while *knowing* that you mustn't think of a blue camel to make it fly. The simple knowledge of it tended to jam up my thinking, and spoil whatever there might be in the day that could appropriately be spoiled.

Of course, I thought, things were going to be a little simpler in the next few minutes. In the next few minutes, one of Me was going to turn into the One Who was Dead.

I have no idea why it was that he, particularly, had deteriorated faster than the other two of us. Could be a confluence of all those little things that, say, make one tumour malignant and another benign. Maybe, when the copying process was sabotaged, he just got a particularly corrupted dose.

He'd holed up on some out-of-the-way ice moon, when I finally tracked him down. My pressure-suited boots had crunched, soundlessly, on frozen methane snow between the jump-pod and the hermetically insulated igloo-dome in which his starved and stinking body lay.

'I fooled them,' he croaked to me. 'Fooled them all, when I made all those copies.' His brain-processes had ablated, now, to the point where I think he believed he was the original Jason Kane.

'Everybody thought I was just being me,' he continued. 'Doing something stupid. I'm good at doing that.' His breath hitched and gurgled, in what I thought might be a death-rattle, having never actually heard one before. It subsided, though, and he went on: 'Didn't realise I was making backups. Passing on the Magic Bullet, encoded down there deep...'

He chuckled. I thought it was a death-rattle again. This would get really irritating after a while, me thinking it was a death-rattle and then being - well, you know, not *disappointed* every time, but you know what I mean.

So let me just say that when he died, he simply stopped, and there was nothing like a death-rattle at all.

'The more copies the better,' he said, now. 'More chances for the Magic Bullet to be fired. He can try all he likes. He can't kill us all.'

A New Life: Two

Candide, being well fed, well clothed, and free from chagrin, soon became again as ruddy, as fresh, and as gay as he had been in Westphalia. His host, Ismael Raab, was pleased to see this change; he was a man six feet high, adorned with two small eyes extremely red, and a large nose full of pimples, which sufficiently declared his infraction of Mahomet's law; his whiskers were the most famous in the country, and mothers wished their sons nothing so much as a like pair. Raab had wives, because he was rich; but he thought in a manner that is but too common in the East and in some of our colleges in Europe. 'Your excellence is brighter than the stars,' said the cunning Persian to the brisk Candide one day, half smiling and half suppressing his words. You must have captivated a great many hearts; you are formed to give and receive happiness.' 'Alas!' answered our hero. 'I was happy only by halves, behind a screen, where I was but half at my ease.'

- Voltaire, *Candide, or, The Optimist, Part 11*

'For a long while now,' I said to Mira, 'it's been as if the universe itself has been out to get me. Us. I don't mean just here and now, I mean through all the what you might call versions of me...'

'That's just paranoia,' she said - and I might not have had a breath of psionic talent myself, but I knew that she was lying. She didn't think this was about paranoia at all.

'And let me tell you,' she continued, 'that's not a reassuring sign in someone who has me effectively helpless like this. "Oh, boo-hoo, the world's against me 'cause I'm not rich and famous and I can't get laid!" is *not* what I like to be hearing at this point. Especially that last part.'

'Yes,' I said. 'You've said something like that before.'

'What?' said Mira.

'Nothing. Don't worry about it.'

'The corruption of the copying process...' I continued, picking off points on our fingers. 'The problems every version of me had after we left the Braxiatel Collection and split up. The weird way we managed to get bumped onto the Manufactory disposal list after the hybrid body-transfer. The fact that the Church of the Righteously Ascended Pure decided to hit that particular facility at that particular time. Some half-crazed Jason Kane jumping on me at exactly the most inconvenient moment - and just the kind of fan who could have got me killed.'

I pointed a finger at my/our face.

'This is the face of a biologically mature adult, fresh out of the skein-tanks. It looks about 15 years old, give or take some self-image delusions. So how does a crazed fan even *recognise* me as Jason Kane? That sort of stuff just keeps on happening. How do you explain all that?'

'Simple run of bad luck,' said Mira. 'It happens.'

'Maybe. And maybe - yes - it might be paranoia. But if it isn't, and we just hope it all goes away, how stupid is that? It's like something, or somebody, out there doesn't like me. Some force out there actively keeping the luck running bad...'

'But I happened to pick up on you, purely by chance, and help you out,' said Mira. 'That wasn't bad luck - for you, at any rate.'

'Yes,' I said. 'And let's talk about that, shall we?'

I walked over to the comms-console and switched on a recorded playback.

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TRANSCRIPTION WETWARE' v2.1.0002. la
SHAREWARE MODE ACTIVE
ACTIVATE ADVANCED MODE FOR CR. 749.95?: N
DEMO MODE. FILTERS RESET AUDIO ONLY

NEW VOICE That went well [...]

ID TAG FOR NEW VOICE?: Y

ID TAG: MIRA

MIRA STORED

NEW VOICE Sure did. Mmm. Protein.

ID TAG FOR NEW VOICE?: Y

ID TAG: JASON KANE

JASON KANE STORED

MIRA Our old drinking game, crashing the
swankiest place we can find just to get thrown out. Happy days, right.
'I've been thrown out of finer establishments than this, you poxy
whoreson dogs! And they were much more civilised about it too!'

JASON KANE Thought you'd appreciate the trip down
memory lane.

INDECIPHERABLE EXTRANEIOUS SOUNDS.

PROVISIONAL TAG?: EATING

ATTEMPT CLOSE SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF EATING?: N

EATING FILTER STORED.

MIRA Thing is, [NULL] are you all right?

JASON KANE What?

MIRA Well, look at you. Through the ruin of
a restaurant stalked the ruin of a man...

JASON KANE So I've got a few bruises. You try bringing
up a half-Killoran eight-year-old. Peter's stronger than most all but
the most fiendishly augmented humans. No offence.

MIRA Of course not. But it was like you were over-
playing it in there too. Going through the motions but it all seemed
so contrived [...]

JASON KANE If you're expecting a [NOT STORED: READ
FOR SENSE] out of me, Mira, you've got another think [?] coming.

MIRA This is *me* saying it, yeah? How long have I known you? Your heart wasn't in it but you were pretending that it was, that it was still the same and nothing had changed [NULL] and you were, I don't know, forcing yourself to act [NULL] forcing yourself to *think* [NULL] like nothing had changed and we were still just having fun freaking out the straights [...]

JASON KANE Mira? Are you [NULL] reading me?

MIRA What?

JASON KANE [INDISTINGUISHABLE]

MIRA I heard what you said. What?

JASON KANE Look [NULL] I mean [INDISTINGUISHABLE]
I wasn't thinking and it just...

MIRA Oh, you were thinking. You dot, dot, dot, considered and then you [EXPLETIVE, VULGAR. CONSIDERED UNACCEPTABLE BY SOME] said it.

JASON KANE I didn't mean [NULL]

MIRA You don't know what you mean. You've known me for, what, how many years, and you know there's something to get, and you fake how you get it - fake it really well [...]

JASON KANE [INDISTINGUISHABLE]

MIRA I've just this second realised [NULL] you just don't get it at all! You know how it is to be a soldier [...]

JASON KANE We both do.

MIRA I'm talking about the distinctions! Not who's what or what. You take murder. Take a murderer.

JASON KANE Murderer? I thought you were talking about soldiers.

MIRA Say one more word, Jason [NULL] you say one more word until I'm finished! I swear to [EXPLETIVE, VULGAR. CONSIDERED UNACCEPTABLE BY SOME] I'm getting up and walking out. You asked for my help. You can listen to me.

[NULL]

MIRA You have the murderers, right; you have the men or women who snap and kill their partners [NULL] or the criminals who kill because the crime demands it, or the crime goes bad [NULL] or the [NOT STORED: READ FOR SENSE] who just do it for the hell of it [NULL] that's uncontrolled. By its very nature. It's stuff that just simply happens. Yes?

JASON KANE [INDISTINGUISHABLE]

MIRA That's the same way so-called paranormal talents express themselves in normals. They read minds, sometimes, or see ghosts, or move things without touching them for no reason anybody knows [NULL] there's no real evidence, even now, that they can really do any of that stuff in the first place [...]

JASON KANE Okay. Yes [...]

MIRA Now your soldiers, on the other hand [NULL] oh, what the hell, don't look at me like that. Let's just talk. Ask me why soldiers are different.

JASON KANE Why are soldiers different?

MIRA: Soldiers are taken and trained for a specific purpose. They're trained to be the instrument of something other than themselves, some government or state, and - right or wrong - their actions exist on a different moral level.

JASON KANE
responsibility?

Just following orders? What about personal

MIRA If you assume personal responsibility, then the appropriate moral values apply. My point is: soldiers don't just happen. They're built within certain parameters - just like the so-called telepaths who come out of the Catan Nebula. When the Manufactories first took me in, they ran every test from Rhine cards to Voort boxes - do you want to guess what they found?

JASON KANE

I dunno. Really. Latent psionic abilities?

MIRA Absolutely nothing. Random results down the line. That's what they were looking for - they didn't want their work contaminated by so-called 'natural' talent. The nano-worms ate out my central nervous system, and they replaced it to design. I come with an inbuilt set of professional ethics - the job is one thing, but, socially, it's literally impossible for me to use my skills on someone without their express consent. It's the way I'm built.

JASON KANE

Yeah, but as I recall, what with being there and all, you got away from the [NULL] people who built you. Got yourself rewired.

MIRA

That I chose to keep. Self-preservation. I mean, look at the people in here - they catch a whiff of an uncontrolled psionic in their midst, they'd stone me to death. [NULL] Probably with these [EXPLETIVE, MILD. ENABLE ADVANCED MODE TO REMOVE AUTO-FILTER] burgers.

JASON KANE

I've seen you, Mira - you can just look at people and come up with insights...

MIRA

Yes, well, there's always the possibility that I've just lied about everything and you'll never know. [NULL] Then again, it might just be that I have eyes in my head, and a brain, and I can make two plus two equal four. [NULL]

JASON KANE

Meaning?

MIRA

[NULL] We're not meeting on your precious

Braxiatel Collection. And the gods alone know it's not for a shag. I know you, Jason. You never do something without a reason. You're one of those people who always has an agenda [NULL] and a tendency to see other people as nothing more than the tools to achieve it.

JASON KANE [NULL] [NULL] [NULL] That's not what people really think about me, is it?

MIRA Oh, you have other qualities too. That's why so many people put up and go along with it. Fact remains, there's something up with you, you're trying to pretend like hell that there isn't but you still want something from me - so let's just cut to the chase and tell me what it is, yes?

JASON KANE So the bottom line is, Mira, you think I just want something from you, that it's all I really care about, and nothing I say or do will convince you otherwise?

MIRA Is there an echo in here? I'm sure I just said all that.

JASON KANE Well, all right then. The fact is, I seem to have picked a fight with someone. 1 [NULL] won't say his name. You know that old superstition, where if you say the name of a demon three times it appears? It's a bit like that. And if you think I'm manipulative, that I treat people like tools, this guy thinks the whole damn universe is his toolbox.

A New Life: Three

They put him to bed, after having bathed his feet with vinegar. The grandees came round him in order to congratulate him on his good fortune. The sophi then came to assist him in person, and not only gave him his hand to kiss, according to the custom, but likewise honoured him with a great blow of his fist on his mouth. Whence the politicians conjectured that Candide would arrive at extraordinary preferment, and what is very uncommon, though politicians, they were not deceived.

Voltaire, Candide, or, The Optimist, Part II

'What the hell?' Mira said. 'How the hell did you get that?'

I got the distinct impression that she was having to control herself, strongly, from launching her body forward from a nervous system that would stay resolutely behind.

'Did you manage to plant a bug on me?' she snapped. 'You couldn't have planted a bug on me.'

'Nothing that crude.' I indicated the data pad that she had given me and was now plugged into the comms-unit. 'You deleted all your personal files, if you remember, but they were pretty easy to reconstruct. That gave us access to your GalNet database, and the next time you went online we introduced a meta-viral hook-up and

ganked an input from your implants. Give or take translation-factor lag, we've been listening in ever since...'

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SHAREWARE MODE ACTIVE
ACTIVATE ADVANCED MODE FOR CR. 749.95?: N
DEMO MODE. FILTERS RESET. AUDIO ONLY

NEW VOICE Here we go. Parking bay seven-ninety-two.

ID TAG FOR NEW VOICE?: Y
ID TAG: JASON KANE
JASON KANE STORED

INDECIPHERABLE EXTRANEOUS SOUNDS. PROVISIONAL TAG?:
SPACEPORT TERMINAL
ATTEMPT SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF SPACEPORT TERMINAL?: N
SPACEPORT TERMINAL FILTER STORED.

NEW VOICE A lot of this looks high-end military - is that
a Draconian warship?

ID TAG FOR NEW VOICE?: Y
ID TAG: MIRA
MIRA STORED

JASON KANE Don't worry. They're leaving. Right, here's
my ship.

MIRA What, behind that total piece of haulage
[EXPLETIVE, MILD. ACTIVATE ADVANCED MODE TO TURN OFF
AUTO-FILTERS]

JASON KANE Mira, what do you think?

MIRA I think, with this total piece of haulage
[EXPLETIVE, MILD. ACTIVATE ADVANCED MODE TO TURN OFF
AUTO-FILTERS] we're going to launch an assault on God? A god,
anyway, know what I mean?

JASON KANE He's not a god, he's a [EXPLETIVE, VULGAR. CONSIDERED UNACCEPTABLE BY SOME. ACTIVATE ADVANCED MODE TO TURN OFF AUTO-FILTERS]. He just messes around with everyone's lives because he can.

MIRA Sounds like the very definition of a god to me. Jason, we're the Plague Dogs, yes? I mean, we have access to a [REGISTERED TRADE NAME. ACTIVATE ADVANCED MODE, ONLY CR. 749.99, TO TURN OFF AUTO-FILTERS] military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette. If there doesn't happen to be anything better on hand. You get what I'm saying?

JASON KANE It would just be a waste of a [REGISTERED TRADE NAME. ACTIVATE ADVANCED MODE, ONLY CR. 749.95, TO TURN OFF AUTO-FILTERS AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OUR FULLY COMPREHENSIVE CUSTOMER SERVICE] military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette. Where we're going, the stresses and translation... well, let's just say that we only need something that'll last just long enough. The cheaper and more disposable the better.

MIRA Okay [NULL] I just can't see said total hunk of haulage crap being let through the door of any Realm of the Gods, is all I'm saying.

JASON KANE We're not going to any Realm of the Gods, Mira. We're going in a whole other direction.

MIRA So where we going, then, there, boss?

JASON KANE We're going to the end of the world. We're going to [EXPLETIVE, MILD. FOR OUR FULLY COMPREHENSIVE, HASSLE-FREE CUSTOMER SERVICE, POWERFUL EDITING AND AUTO-FILTER OPTIONS AND THE COMPLETE LACK OF AN EVER-ESCALATING SERIES OF NAGS IMPLYING THAT YOU ARE NOTHING BUT AN EXPLETIVE FREELOADER, UNLOCK THE ADVANCED OPTIONS FOR JUST CR. 749.95.]

'And there you go,' I said to the immobilised Mira. 'That was why the *original* me wanted you. Wanted your help. You've been helping Jason Kane gather evidence on a bastard who seems to have been messing

with him, deal with things that are screwing up his life. Any of that sound familiar?'

'That has nothing to do with anything.' Mira, I noticed, had started to tremble. She'd do herself an injury, against the stasis field, if she didn't stop. There's no connection.'

I was astonished. 'So, what you're saying is, basically, a man named Jason Kane is having his life messed up by someone, while at the same time a man named Jason Kane is having his life messed up someone. And you can't see a similarity? You honestly expect me to believe that you can't see a connection? You're lying, Mira. And you're not doing it very well.'

'The situations are nothing alike!' Mira shouted. She was actively shaking now. 'You're nothing alike! There's no connection because there's not, connection because there's not, connection because there's not, connection because there's not, connection because there's not, connection because there's not...'

Haemorrhages were blossoming under the exposed areas of her skin. She was going to tear herself apart against the stasis field if she remained caught in this mental loop. There was nothing for me to do, now, except slap the switch to cut it - even though I knew that this would result in her coming for me, on a kind of automatic pilot, and tearing me apart instead.

Fortunately, at this point, a number of the other items of equipment, arrayed around the wall of the lock-up, finished what had been some pretty heavy-duty analysis, fired up a pair of microsurgical, directional pulse-pump emitters, and burnt out a small but significant portion of Mira's cerebral cortex.

A New Life: Four

The good of philosophy is its inspiring us with a love for our fellow-creatures. Paschal is almost the only philosopher who seems desirous to make us hate our neighbours. Luckily Candide had not read Paschal, and he loved the poor human race very cordially. This was soon perceived by the upright part of the people. They had always kept at a distance from the pretended legates of heaven, but made no scruple of visiting Candide and assisting him with their counsels. He made several wise regulations for the encouragement of agriculture, population, commerce, and the arts. He rewarded those who had made any useful experiments; and even encouraged such as had produced some essays on literature.

- Voltaire, *Candide*, or, *The Optimist*, Part II

One of the nice things about living in what I will forever, in some sense, never see as anything but The Future, is that cerebral tissue can actually be regenerated. I had a medical regeneration unit handy, under a tarpaulin, where I had very carefully made sure I hadn't noticed it amongst the old junk.

You lose whatever it was that bit of brain-matter contained, of course, but then you can't have everything. I mean, it wasn't as if it

had contained anything good. Besides, losing a chunk of your memories and having to deal with it is good for the character, I'm here to tell you. Keeps the mind occupied and working hard.

It took Mira half an hour to come out of the anaesthetic and I spent the time watching over her. It was a relief to let myself remember more about her than I'd previously been able to let on. Some of the things we'd done together.

It was still incomplete, and it still hadn't been *me* doing those things, but the memories and feelings were real. Real enough to make no odds to me, in any case.

'Wotcha,' I said, giving her a little wave when she woke up.

For a moment she cast about herself, as though looking for someone who wasn't there, with senses not necessarily the same *as* sight. Then she looked at me, and I could see that she recognised... well, recognised *something*, anyway.

'Ah,' she said at last

'I'm afraid so,' I said, shrugging.

'So how did you do it?' she asked, shaking her head as if to clear it. I had the irrational urge to try and stop her - as if the newly repaired tissue would come loose or something and start sloshing about. Totally stupid thought, of course.

'You're not wrong there,' said Mira. Telepathy as such might be impossible, but she was capable *at* spotting a complex of thought-processes and tagging them as a 'stupid thought' like a shot.

'It was never that hard,' I said. 'Largely on account, as you know, of you liking girlies more than boys in general and much, much more than *me* in particular, and us having no sexual chemistry whatsoever..'

'And yet you still manage to push it into even more negative amounts,' said Mira. Then she looked incredibly confused for *a* moment. 'That is, not you but...' She recovered. 'How did you do it?'

'Like I said, 'wasn't hard.'

'It takes training to fool my implants like that' said Mira. 'Training I know for a fact that you don't have. Any version of you.'

'Well, I suppose that neural block you were subjected to didn't help,' I said. 'But this is *me* you're taking to, Mira. yeah? Or a given value of me. And I'm a total bloody hypochondriac - I get one sniffle and I'm lying on my death bed with the lurgey- I have a spot *at* identity trouble and problems with my memory, how hard do you think it would be for me to come *off* like a total basket case?' I grinned. 'Then again, it's always been easy to make people think I'm a whole lot dumber than I am.'

'You think,' said Mira, grumpily. 'How long were you doing it? How much of it was a lie?'

'Almost all of it wasn't,' I said, a little hurt at this casual slight to my basic veracity, since everybody knows I'm honest as the day is long. 'Almost all of it was true. Just not my... attitudinal relationship to it.'

Mira snorted. 'Attitudinal relationship.'

'It wasn't where I was standing,' I said, 'so much as which direction I was looking. Almost all the facts were true. I found my dying other self and learned that, when he copied us, Jason Kane made sure to include a little packet of automemes, buried in the subconscious. Everything he suspected that was happening, back at the Collection, everything that was going wrong. Set to trigger if they were proved correct. Something to clue us in, if some of the things that he himself was only starting to suspect at the time turned out to be true. And... well, you probably know more about that, by now, than I do.'

'You mean you don't know?' said Mira. 'Weren't you keeping tabs on us in Fractured Time?'

'Fractured Time plays merry Hob with the reception,' I told her. 'Last I saw, the pair of you were about to be eaten by an enormous space octopus or something. Anyhow. The hybrid mind-transfer, the memory-bomb, all that stuff in the Catan Nebula Manufactory happened more or less like I said. I was in the process of pulling myself out of it - but then you turned up, and suddenly all bets were off.'

'How so?' Mira asked.

'You can't guess?' I said.

'I'm not a bloody mind-reader, you know,' said Mira.

'All bets were off because I looked at you, and the automemes Jason Kane had implanted kicked off with a vengeance. Because I knew for a fact that you were dead.'

The memories of her had come rushing back, the instant I had seen her, slicing at me like claws, as if they were some desperate and struggling animal.

The times we'd spent, the scams we'd run under the name of the Plague Dogs. Total Bujold-operation; we'd hire operatives as and when we needed them, like they were session musicians to round out what was basically a one-man-one-girl band. And we'd played half the galaxy - entire sectors living in dread of the mythical Plague Dog pirate Clan. It was my home away from home. It was a lot like love,

without the mucky stuff getting in the way. what with Mira liking the girlies more than the boys, and liking me even less than that, in that particular way...

And then the Collection had been hit by Axis forces and occupied. There I was, in a fat suit, collaborating with the occupying forces and looking after a heap of kids on the side, to keep them from the internment camps, because there was nobody else who could.

There was an assassination attempt Maybe it was some hothead, some moron who had bought into the lie about me being a collaborator. Maybe it was from the Axis side, who had caught on to what I was really doing. I have no memory of who it might have been.

Doesn't matter. The way I look at it it would have had to be somebody I'd crossed, or irritated, and was simply looking for an excuse. Any stick will do. after all. or so they say. to beat a dog.

(And here's a news flash. I now know what a dog looks like. I only wish I'd found out in a different way.)

Mira had been running the off-planet side of the operation. She caught a sense that I was in danger, in the same way that she would later catch the danger I was in. in the Catan Nebula Manufactory facility. She junked the plan, came down to help me. Got there just in time to throw herself between me and the assassin's gun.

Holes opened up in her before my eyes. She died In my arms, while our guys took care of the assassin. Something they'd have done in any case, whether or not she'd been there to do something so stupid as throw herself in front of the gun.

There memories aren't mine, they never happened to me, even though I carry them... but that's the very least unfair thing about them. It was a stupid, pointless death, and it should never have happened.

Obviously, someone else had thought so. too.

The thing I don't quite understand,' I said, 'is why Jason - the original Jason Kane - didn't remember that as well. He obviously didn't find anything wrong with the idea of walking around and talking as if you were alive.'

I thought about it

'Maybe that was one of the reasons he made us." I decided at last 'Made me. In the hope that my memories of what really happened would get overlooked in the shuffle and cany on. I seem to remember being cheated out of the chance to have lads. Maybe this was his shot at having something cany on."

Mira was speechless. 'I'm not...' she said, which was a good trick, I'll admit, what with her being speechless and all.

'It was during the Occupation,' I said. 'You caught wind that I was in trouble, came down to help... and walked into a trap that had been set for me. You saved my life, gave your life for mine. I dedicated my next book to your memory. Or at least named the heroine after you.'

I paused for a moment, remembering. It was one of those things, frankly, that I wish I couldn't. And since it was a memory of something that had, obviously, ended up not happening, this seemed hardly fair.

'It didn't happen like that,' Mira said. 'None of it happened like that. I was saved. By... I won't say his name either. He looked after me. It was him who told me to keep an eye on what Jason was doing and tell him about it. And then he told me to keep tabs on you. to make sure you didn't remember anything about... oh, *no*... oh. God...'

'And there we go,' I said, as her realisation dawned. That was the mental block he gave you, somehow. I think he's able to do it with his mind or something. You knew all that, but you just simply couldn't connect it to anything else.'

'Oh, God... ' Mira said again. 'I've sold him out. I sold *you* out... I've killed you both.'

'Not necessarily,' I said, hoping like hell that would reassure her more than it did me. 'Maybe there's still something we can do.'

And, so, well, not to give the game away, but we all know how well *that* turned out.

There we were, Mira and myself, heading for the Collection, lickety-split. in a General InfraDynix Hypersystems. military-spec. Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette. Here come de cavalry, last chance of deliverance, hope for the helpless and all that happy whatnot.

Now. you have to understand. The primary dictum of my life - after opening my eyes for the first actual time and realising I was the copy, rather than the copier, and realising I'd made the biggest mistake ever in that life - was that I had to remove myself from any and all direct contact between myself and the original Jason Kane. And of course with Benny - I mean. Professor Bernice Summerfield. Let's keep things formal. Because any other course would end in madness.

Of course, it had been Benny - I mean Professor Summerfield - who had explained this to me. and indicated, in the nicest possible way. that I should sling my hook.

(I have to say, she really wasn't trying to be nasty about it. just kind. And I could feel within myself the truth of what she told me - she just had to be the one to tell it.)

It was a big thing for me, took a lot out of me, even to try and contact the original Jason and Bernice. In the end, I needn't have worried - or rather, I was worrying about entirely the wrong thing.

Every call I made was blocked. Heavy-duty scrambling. And then, quite suddenly, the block was lifted. Neither Jason Kane nor Professor Bernice Summerfield, the system told me, were listed as residing on the Collection.

Whatever had happened, had already happened.

We were too late.

And so the question is: what now? Do we go in anyway, all guns blazing, and likely wind up dead for no point? Wouldn't that just, in the end, make a mockery of everything the original Jason Kane did to keep some part of himself alive? To keep some part of the truth alive?

Mira and me have been getting on well, it seems, now that I'm feeling and acting more myself. I'm not the man she knew and never will be. But there seems - to me at least - to be some breath of that deep connection I remember us having. It's a lot like love, without getting messed up by the squishy bits.

I just don't know. Maybe it would just be better to turn our backs on the Collection, and all the memories that don't make sense, and let the whole damn pack of them go to hell in their own way. It's not our problem.

Wouldn't it be better, in the end, to just go somewhere else and do something else. Anything else. Just take a walk out there and see what happens.

What do you advise?

Epilogue

All of the above was written, what, decades ago now. Well in actual fact, as a bear of any brain at all will have noticed, it wasn't really written at all.

It exists, here and now, because of PIFFLE. That's a Probability/Inference-based Forensic Formal Lexicon-generating Engine. It's a handy wetware-based device we have these days, which scans a subject's neural architecture and extrapolates a text he thinks he's written. It spots what's basically a book-shaped hole in the mass, consensual delusion we call the world, and generates something to fill it up.

It gets a fair bit of use - you'd be surprised how many people there are, wandering around and thinking that they've written books, when in fact they have done nothing of the sort.

PIFFLE is incredibly easy to use. You wouldn't believe how much of what we see and hear these days is pure PIFFLE. The problem really lies in getting it to stop.

On the other hand, there's always the possibility that I'm making this PIFFLE up off the top of my head and lying about everything. You never really know.

Anyhow.

Things have changed in those years. I'm older, obviously, but exactly what that means gets a little complicated.

I came into the world, phenomenally speaking, as a biological adult. That's the point at which the human body increments toward catabolism - that is, getting older and falling apart until you die - so in a sense I've had maybe 15 or 16 years lopped off my life-expectancy. On the other hand, my basic gene-skein template, customised to simulate the genome that once belonged to a man named Jason Kane, has greater inbuilt longevity than I remember humans having back in the twentieth century.

And, of course, I had *memories* spanning more than thirty years of lifetime straight out of the box, to take one point of view, and more than five hundred years if you take another. All things considered, I suspect I'll end up ahead of the game, when I finally turn up my toes. Unless of course I turn my toes up tomorrow, in which case I'll end up ahead of precisely bugger all.

I've come to terms with my memories, those that have settled down and the holes where it seems like nothing will ever settle out. The weight of a life that was never truly mine, if not lifted, has become progressively easier to carry. This is probably because I've been busy making new memories, memories of my own.

I still find myself in two minds about a lot of things, thinking and wanting things that seem mutually exclusive to the point where they're sometimes irreconcilable - but then again, you could probably say that about anybody.

So, anyway, Mira and I, we went off and we did stuff. Quite a lot of stuff, in fact. The Plague Dogs are still out there as some nebulously piratical mercenary force, but ultimately two people and their hired help.

Oh, the stories they tell, in what they laughingly call the galactic core-civilisations, of those bloodthirsty buccaneers out there, who will cut in through the hull of your ship, disrespect your womenfolk and make you walk the space plank. It gets like we're a bloody tourist attraction, sometimes.

(And let me just say, while we're being honest, just between us - that's entirely intentional. If the Plague Dogs didn't have that romanticism attached, and were seen as anything more than a kind of Crimson Pirate-type exciting lark, we'd have been hunted down long ago by the various sector security services and wiped out.)

I can think of any number of scams and heists we'd have never been able to pull off if we'd been under that sort of serious scrutiny.)

Actually, there are more than two of us involved, these days. It's turned into a family business. We'll talk about that, particularly, in a moment.

A lot of people - in day-to-day life, I mean, not when I'm coming the rabidly enthusiastic Edward Teach⁹ and she's all Slinky Stone-cold Killer Pirate Queen — tend not to get the relationship between Mira and me. It's like they simply can't seem to get their heads around a deep and lasting connection and love that doesn't include the squishy bits.

I'm not going to stand here and tell you it's the best of both worlds, or some such, just that it works for us. The decoupling, as it were, these days of procreation from having to boff away until the bed collapses, means that all sorts of relationships are possible, and even preferable to those based upon - ahem - such a little thing.

(In a world where human beings engage in any number of relationship-forms, up to and including formalised hive-structures as a matter of course, the only reason I'm even wasting my time thinking about these things is that I still carry the remembered contamination from the dark old days of the twentieth century.)

That whole idea that the best possible environment to raise kids is in the company of a man and a woman who remain faithful, so far as the mucky stuff is concerned, unto death. Yes, well, in my remembered experience, we all know what a wonderful environment to raise kids that was.)

What it does mean, though, is that you can be open to any and all entanglements of a certain kind along the way, without the danger that they might break up your happy home...

This was my first time, the physical and actual me, ever on Planet Earth. I'd expected the air itself to taste special - or rather, if you get me, the reverse.

My body was human, and more basically human than most, since it was based on a core genome from before the various threads of humanity branched off to begin adapting to alien environments. Planet Earth was where my body had evolved - so shouldn't breathing the air itself seem more natural and... well, *right*, on some deep level, than the air of anywhere else I'd ever been?

9 Advice for life, here: if you're going to have a big, bristly beard affixed to the face by a kind of spectacle-handle arrangement, make damn sure it's made of fire-retardant materials before sticking smoking tapers in it.

Pulling it off and jumping up and down on it while going, 'Shit! Sod! Bigger' tends to somewhat spoil the piratical effect.

Instead, the air tasted of smoke and chemicals and all sorts of accumulated crap from centuries - millennia - of human planetary misuse. People would occasionally go on mass-environmental kicks to clean it up, I gathered, over the years... but then the next big war or disaster would happen and undo all their hard work.

Terraforming technologies, of the sort that rendered planets habitable by humans, would not work unless they were allowed to reduce the entire surface of the planet to a basalt crust, skinned with water, and then start again from scratch. There are some who might say that would not be a bad idea.

Anyhow. The air tasted foul, and there was a tightness in my chest. That tightness, though, was more to do with fear. That was because I was coming out of a shuttle-pod, off a city-sized Star Sentinel dreadnought, in the company of about seven EarthSec security operatives, every one with a gun out, and ready to blow my head off if I did a single thing they didn't like.

We'd been wandering through what was now called the Dagellan Cluster, and what had once been the Three Empires - doing nothing much, just a sort of family holiday - when the Star Sentinel had dopplered in out of nowhere. Literally. They're big enough to generate their own pocket-singularities.

A General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette was and is the state of the art - upgraded as it had been on a grandfather's-axe basis - but there was no way we could take on more than maybe five of the vicious little fighters the Sentinel could release in a swarm, let alone the Sentinel itself.

'We can't rabbit,' Mira said. They're locking on.' She fired up the comms. Stand down! Repeat, stand down! We have children aboard. Stand down!'

This was even more true than usual, unfortunately. Callum and Lucy were aboard, of course, being nine and five respectively. Daniel was 15, and had come back from the Daghreensi Academy for the holidays. And Mira was two months into carrying a person who, at this point, rejoiced in the name of Peanut.

To the extent that it's possible, I suppose, we're as low-tech in the matter of children as it is possible to get. Not much more than some minor surgical procedures on Mira, to correct some damage done by her implantation as a child and so-called 'ghost lesions' - scarring from an event, similar to blaster wounds, that never, in fact, happened.

As for the rest, it's frankly None of Your Business. Let's just say that there are two turkey-basters in our household, and it would not be a good idea to mix them up. There's an old joke about the girl who mistook her toothpaste (in the cleaned-up version) for epoxy-resin sealant, and all her windows fell out.

Every time, I have to tell you, Mira swears she's never going to go through it again, and that from here on out it's hi-tech exogenesis all the way. And then, after a while, she wants to do it again. Wants to do it again extremely forcibly. On account of the fact that I can *sometimes* spot a minefield when standing in the middle of it, I'm not gonna say a word.¹⁰

So, anyhow. With the Star Sentinel pulse-ejectors tracking us, and its silos popping open, I was depressingly aware that the General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette was a full house. One person got itchy with the firing-protocols and that would be it.

'Let's find out what they want,' I said to Mira. 'And then we'll give it to them.'

Mira opened up the comms.

'*General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette,*' a rather prissy sounding voice said. '*You are registered out of the Proximan Chain, standard privateer license, under the name of Jason Peter Kane?*'

'Uh, yes?' I said.

The name still doesn't seem to sit quite right with me, I have to say, even after all these years. In the way that, apparently, people think of their name and it's, you know, their *name*. The problem is, I've never been able to come up with a name that doesn't fit worse. I try not to use it, as much as I can.

'*Jason Peter Kane,*' said the voice, using it. '*You are hereby detained for transportation to Earth, under Presidential Dictum oh seven five three nine four one slash seven...*'

'Earth?' said Mira. 'What the hell have you been getting up to on Earth?'

'Nothing!' I said. 'I've never been to Earth in my life! Well, you know, this life, anyway.'

* * *

10 Oh. all right. It's probably a girly thing. Women, eh? What about them. You know, there was this time -

Er. What are you doing with that big knife. Mira?

The second surprise - the first being the appearance of the Star Sentinel in the first place - was that I was not actually under arrest. Presidential Dictum oh seven five three nine and all the rest of it, apparently, merely said that I was to be escorted to Plant Earth 'with all due dispatch'.

This meant that we effectively had the run of the non-classified areas of the Sentinel, after the General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette had been tractor-manipulated into its docking bay.

The kids were in their element. Daniel has always been quite serious and technical-minded, and was able to score all manner of intel and wetware-upgrading from technicians he talked into showing him around. Cal and Lucy went tandem, teaming up on big and burly marines with tales of the privations endured growing up on a privateer ship, and made out like bandits. I wondered if the cargo hold on the General InfraDynix Hypersystems, military-spec, Pulse-pump Cannon Class Interstellar Battle Corvette would be enough for all the sweets and the suchlike they acquired.

There were hospitality facilities for adults, and Mira took advantage of them. I wasn't in the mood, myself. This might or might not have been due to the seven or so armed EarthSec security guys who were following me around every damn minute - God alone knows where they expected me to go.

The Star Sentinel's pocket-singularity was capable of translating it across half the galaxy instantly, but it couldn't arrive in the gravitational field of a solar system, so the trip took a few days. By which time, under this constant security supervision, I was damned near crawling up the bulkheads.

Now, the security service men hustled me out of the landing-pod, muttering things like 'bird dog is in the pavilion' and 'condition is puce' and the like. I hardly had time to catch my breath in the foul-tasting air, let alone get much of a chance to look round.

What I saw, though, was a bit surprising. I'd expected some military or at least governmental facility. What I saw was something far more palatial, nestled tastefully in grounds that had been manicured to within an inch of their genetically modified plant life.

The security men took me through marbled halls packed with the historical treasures of Old Earth - either the genuine articles, or reproductions so perfect as to make no odds. We fetched up, eventually, in a sumptuous drawing room.

A figure in a simple twin set lounged casually on a chaise longue, flipping through documents that appeared to have been printed on actual sheets of parchment.

'Madam President...' one of the security men said. 'Your guest.'

I'd been vaguely aware that the President of Earth was a woman. I'd only noted that as in any way memorable, in itself, because of a mind formed in the twentieth century, where women in high office were the exception rather than the rule. I'd never given it any more thought than that, what with having no interest in the politics of Earth whatsoever.

At the time I could not even remember the name she was going by - it certainly wasn't any name I would remember.

Now, she set down the sheaf of official documents and climbed to her feet, smiling broadly. She was a tall, slender woman with cropped, silver hair and a figure that spoke directly to my more *Neanderthal bits.

'Jason!' Benny Summerfield said, with every evidence of delight. 'You're still going by that name, I believe? It's been far, far too long.'

I might have mentioned, previously, that memories on certain subjects in the life of Jason Kane were withheld from me when I was created, and that I don't regard this as entirely fair. I have to say that I still feel that way... but with a following wind I can more or less understand why it was done.

There are certain things, quite simply, that are None of Your Business.

The President of Planet Earth was Benny. Benny was the President of Earth. She seemed a little older than I remembered, in the memories of Jason Kane and from my own brief actual meetings with her. Then again, weren't we all? The years had been far kinder to her than might be... none of which mattered a damn, because Benny was the sodding *President of Planet Earth!*

She still regarded it all as a bit of a mix-up, she confided to me, even though she genuinely had been voted for and inaugurated and all the rest of it. The only thing about it that was not completely honest and above-board was the name she was going under to do it.

She confided all this to me over a candle-lit dinner, the table-setting for which had appeared instantly, with a word to her security service minions. Whatever else it was, this was hardly the sort of Presidential audience I had expected, after having been dragged here by way of a big Star Sentinel.

We simply talked, of this and that, about what we had been doing with our lives over the years. Benny let me do most of the talking, I recall, no doubt assuming that her own life would be tolerably well known, what with being *President of Planet Earth* and so forth.

And all the while this woman from my memories was sitting across from me, eyes alive in the candle light, and smiling. There was a scent to her, some jasmine perfume, that I could not quite place but which I seemed to have known all through every different version of my life...

And it was at this point, of course, that this happened, and that happened, and one thing led to another, and everything that happened after *that* is None of Your Business.

I woke up feeling hugely rested and quite cheerful. That was nice, I thought. As nice as all the times I completely fail to remember.

The thing about it, though, was that it wasn't this huge rush of love and joy and inner peace, like I get curled up with Mira and doing nothing more than sleeping. It was more like having finally put paid to some business that I'd been putting off for years... well, when you come down to it, for all my life.

There was a clatter of nearby cutlery. Food would be nice. I sat up in the Presidential Bed, yawning.

President Benny - I still couldn't remember her assumed name for the life of me - was at a little table by the window, forking a small pile of scrambled eggs into her mouth.

'Breakfast?' she asked, with her mouth full. 'You've got to keep your strength up. I've cleared my schedule for the morning.'

'Sounds good to me,' I said.

In the morning light, and not being a complete and utter moron, I could now see all the tells and little imperfections that I'd ignored during the happy fun and games of the night before. I don't mean imperfections, do I? She was 100 per cent perfect - and that was what stood out.

'It's good work,' I said sitting down and helping myself to eggs from a salver. 'Catan Nebula?'

'Only the very best,' she said, munching away. 'You'd know all about that. I mean, look at you. You walk into the room and you *bleed sex*.' She smiled. 'And I'll have you know I have a *very* discriminating sense in these things. I'm surprised you can move for all the jaws dropping, let alone the other things dropping.'

'Can't say I've ever noticed,' I said. 'I mean, I've never had people chasing me down the street and throwing their pants at me or

anything like that - though I seem to remember that happening to the original version of me, at some point,' I shrugged. 'Maybe it's just like attracting like - our bodies interacting on some deep level because of their similar origin and nature.'

'Or perhaps it's because they're the bodies of two people who were fated to be together,' said the President. 'In some other life. It's certainly not the minds - I just got my *genes* from Professor Bernice Summerfield. I'm my own person, though.'

She pushed her empty plate away.

'In any case,' she said. 'I only have the morning free. Let's get business out of the way.'

'You know, I sort of thought you wouldn't have me found and dragged across half the galaxy just for the sake of a quick shag,' I said.

'Don't be too sure. I'm the bloody President - I really am, you know - and I can do what I like. Well, within certain limits. Persuading Congress took a bit of doing.'

'So, what's this all about, then?' I asked her. 'This is about Benny, isn't it? The original one, the pattern you're cut from. You're looking for an "in" to her or something, and you want to get it through me?'

The President of Earth frowned, seriously. I had a sudden memory of her younger, less grey, a fringe falling down across sad, sad eyes. A woman who could have you kicking a hole in a stained-glass window, even while she told you what was happening to the saint in it was going to be done to you.

'We're not off on some mission to go find Original Benny?' I said.

'We're a little too late for that,' she replied. 'We've already picked up what was left of her.'

MEMORY is like a purse - if it be over-full that it cannot shut, all will drop out of it. Take heed of a gluttonous curiosity to feed on many things, lest the greediness of the appetite of thy memory spoil the digestion thereof.

- Thomas Fuller

An IDENTITY is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger... Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes.

- James Baldwin

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is more in the nature of an essay than a note, and possibly a rather self-serving and indulgent one at that. Feel free to skip, if you like. Nobody's pointing an actual gun at your head."

There's a classic episode of *The Simpsons* - i.e. one where you go oh, bugger, it's one of the *old* ones - where the Itchy and Scratchy Movie is coming out. The in-show ad is proudly emblazoned with the legend: '53 Per Cent New Material'.

I mention that because, some might say, that pretty much describes every book I've ever written. Except the very first one, obviously - no, wait, for that I borrowed heavily from material I'd already written for comics.

This is because, working in a field that the proper SF guys automatically dismiss as 'spinoffery' and is the modern-day equivalent of what used to be called pulp-fiction, I'm a jobbing writer of pulp-fiction in the old school. The one with a long and semi-honourable tradition of selling a text and then stripping it for parts, filing off the numbers, rebuilding the parts into something else and selling it *again*.

And repeat until rich, dead in the gutter, or both.

There's this guy, right, who did all these plays and stuff where boys dressed up as girls, girls dressed up as boys and everybody got married in the end... and cue the standard-issue disclaimer of me not thinking I in any way remotely compare. You have to make a point of the fact that you aren't, in my experience, on account of the number of ill-read morons who genuinely think that you are.

More recently, comparatively, there's the classic case of the writer (who shall remain nameless here, just in case, 'cause there are those) who had a number of Fantasy book lines, each starring some different incarnation of an effectively immortal hero. At some point, in each of these lines, each respective avatar found himself fighting a multiversal Final Battle alongside all the other ones. The result: four separate books, bought and paid for, *with almost exactly the same text in each*.

This would be enough to make the guy my hero, even if - allegedly - all that text wasn't written on speed and in 72 hours tops. I couldn't do that without killing myself, these days, combining as I do not being very good with not being very fast.

All of which is to say, those who might accuse me of being nothing more than a hack who recycles himself are presupposing that I've ever

claimed to be anything else. This is what you get, when you get me, and anyone who has a problem with it has a simple solution, in the same way that every TV comes with an 'off' switch.

(I was also gonna mention that I originally trained in art, which has an entirely different attitude to the revisiting and reworking of material - but then I'd have to claim to be an artist, and there's only just so much that the human sides can bear. And plus it would also bring up the question of a lack of any training whatsoever in writing basic English.)

Anyhow.

I bring all that up to make it clear that what we have here, what you have hopefully just read with wonder and joy, is something different. This book was conceived, by me if no one else, as an absolutely up-front equivalent of a *Simpsons* clip-show - the sort where Troy McClure comes on and says how in real life Matt Groening is a vicious, pitiful and ultimately contemptible alcoholic whom everybody hates and... sorry. Channelling something else, there. Can't think what.

The thinking was this: Events in the world of Benny Summerfield had contrived to make a summation desirable for a hugely important part of her life - her relationship with her ex-husband, Jason Kane.

The problem for me, and for a large part of the reading audience, is that there's a gaping hole in that relationship so far as the Big Finish universe is concerned - i.e. What Benny Ever Saw in the Poor Sap in the First Place.

This is not a good thing, since it informs and forms the basis for their entire modus of interaction. The lack is not a hole, it is - as Harlan Ellison said, somewhere, about the lack of something else - a Whole.

The reason for it is of course simple: all that stuff takes place in books that are more than a decade out of print... and which, for obvious reasons, will never, ever be reprinted in their original form.

It'd be nice to think that those books still live on, in the hearts and minds of those fortunate enough to have read them... but come on. And if you're gonna get new people on board, then telling them that things won't make true emotional sense unless you track down this ratty old out-of-print paperback from god knows where is the very kiss of death.

The solution, likewise, seemed simple. Strip out all the extraneous matter (concerning the adventures of some itinerantly interdimensional paramedical technician, I seem to recall) from two or three books and it should be simplicity itself to cut-and-paste together

a working text. If not Dave's (and Jason's) Greatest Hits, then at least a compendium of the nearest misses.

Something which, at the very least, would go some way to explaining Benny's attachment to the man and why she might think it was kind of a reasonably sized deal.

Slap together some minimal armature to support that matter in a flashback-structure and, bam, there it is back firmly in the Cannon. Nothing could be easier, right?

Well, no.

My problem is, I can never leave well enough alone. My definition of short-weight might be markedly different from your own, and somewhat looser-packed, but I can never quite bring myself to give what I consider to be it.

Somebody once made the remark that I was in the business of producing toilet paper from recycled materials - my point is yeah, okay, fine, but it still has to be soft, and strong, and do the job.

There had to be a *reason* for the flashbacks, for the going back over of old ground. Fortunately, for me, the very fine and funny Philip Purser-Hallard provided one, in the guise of his fine and funny *Sex Secrets of the Robot Replicants*. You'll have also read it, right at the start, because he very kindly allowed me to reprint it in its entirety

I love it when a plan comes together, and there's a whole extra bunch of words I don't have to come up with myself. It's like pulling teeth, sometimes, believe you me.

With that reason on board, the story I wanted to tell became not only inevitable but also necessary.

That meant, though, that for the story to work, it had to be from a single viewpoint. (Well, two, and sometimes three, but you'll have already noticed that.)

Changing from a multiple to a single viewpoint is an entirely different proposition from merely changing all the pronouns from third-person to first. Certainly, it merits a far closer attention to the writing than any basic cut-and-paste ever would.

And then the *writing*... Oh, dear me.

Now, back in the day I had a lot of energy, but much less skill, and far less clarity of thought in any literary sense than I do now. Hard though that might be to believe.

I was convinced, though, of my own Genius - and was able to push, somehow, through my own lack of acumen by sheer deluded force of will. The fact that I now know myself to be somewhere there on the Asperger's Spectrum, and didn't at the time, might account for the sheer length of time I kept that delusion up.

Like every other soi-genius, though, I tended to confuse the complex with the complicated, the erudite with the overblown. Yes, yes, I know, but I'm slightly more aware of it now. I have consultations with a clinical psychologist and everything. Or at least, a spot on the waiting list for when the world turns into a slice of fluffiness and cake, or when hell freezes over, whichever is the soonest. Don't blame me. Back in 1997, I wanted to vote for a Labour government but there wasn't one.

I failed, back then, in any case, to realise the simple and obvious fact: it wasn't that people weren't getting me because they were stupid - they were failing to get me precisely because they weren't. They could tell what good writing was, and mine patently wasn't it.

And, plus, for a number of reasons, I'd got it in my head that I was going to try to write like Jane Austen. And to my entirely unliterary way of thinking this translated into, 'Hey, I know, let's make it even *more* complicated, quasi-archaic and overblown!'

Like I said: Oh, dear. Impenetrable isn't the word. Not a long, complicated and impenetrable enough word, certainly.

Long story short: Line by line, revision by revision, I don't think there's a word here, in the material extant, that hasn't been re-cut, reset or at the very least given a polish. The nearest equivalent I can think of - without pretending to be anywhere near as good - is what Orson Scott Card has done, revisiting his *Ender's Game* and retelling it from a different viewpoint.

Ender's Shadow, as it happens, begins with an apologia making it clear as to what Card is doing... more or less as I'm doing here, but at the end. This is on the basis that, this way round, there's a chance that the reader will get some way into the book before closing it with a snap and hurling it across the room, rather than doing so right at the start.

Another way to imagine it (to go back to my original *Simpsons* allusion) might be as an old episode re-rendered in the later style and the more dated references cut, contemporised, or at least made more timeless.

I'm quite aware that any number of people might still see the above as the sort of cut-and-paste job I described earlier, and might possibly feel cheated - for which I can only apologise, and hope that enough people agree that the exercise was and is worthwhile, in and of itself.

For obvious reasons, this work has basically been a book-long suicide note, and I'd hate for anyone to think I wasn't taking it seriously.

Dave Stone, 2007

Oh, all right. For absolutely no known reason whatsoever, here's my go at a *Two Ronnies* sketch:

INT. department STORE. DAY

A SMARTLY TURNED-OUT, HIGH-CLASS SALESMAN, BARKER, STANDS AT A COUNTER. A LARGE SIGN BEHIND HIM READS: SEX department.

A WELL-DRESSED CORBETT ENTERS.

BARKER Good afternoon, sir! How may I help you?

CORBETT (*Plummy*) Good day to you. I'd like some sex, please.

BARKER Well, you've come to the right place. We've got hot sex, cool sex, sex *a la mode*; long sex, short sex, somewhere-in-between sex...

CORBETT Um...

BARKER We've got man-sex, lady-sex, gay, straight sex, bent sex, kinky sex and Middlesex...

CORBETT I, uh...

BARKER We've got how's your father, mind your mother, watch out for your granny and Charlie's Aunt...

CORBETT I...

BARKER French polishing, German au pairs, Balinese virgins, expeditions up the Khyber Pass...

CORBETT Stop! Stop this filth! I've never been so insulted in my life!

BARKER Well, sir did say that he was looking for sex.

CORBETT Yes, sex! I need sex! To put my cole in!

THE TWO JASONS

'Oh bloody hell,' she snapped. 'Listen: me no wantee good time jig-jig all same, okay?'

When Bernice Summerfield first met Jason Kane, she failed to spot his many fine qualities and assets. Over the course of many subsequent adventures, including marriage and divorce, she continued not to see them...

'You're not Jason,' she said. 'Who the hell are you?'

When Bernice Summerfield met Jason Kane 2, he was disguised as a critic of the work of Jason Kane. Benny saw through the false moustache and literary pretensions, and had him and his other clones expelled into space, there to make their own fortunes. One Jason Kane was, she felt, rather more than enough.

Now something is afoot in the universe, a plot that threatens Benny and all she holds dear. If she stands any chance at all, she needs all the Jason Kanes she can get...

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WORLDS 

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